



Dark VINTAGE

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A MIDNIGHT DOMS COLLECTION

INES JOHNSON

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Romance and Silverwood Press**

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HER VAMPIRE PRINCE

CHAPTER ONE

*H*adrian

I SEE the invaders on the horizon. For the last ten hours, they have battered the safe house where I've holed up. They're an army of many where I am only one. If a breach were to happen it would be a massacre. Their sheer numbers would overwhelm me in an instant and I would be but dust.

Victory is in sight as the terrorists begin their retreat. Their bright orange armor grows dim as the pale moon rises. Their yellow arms slink slowly behind the vista as the dark of night falls.

I feel strong today. Strong and filled with a passion I haven't felt in many years. Rational thought flees my mind. I yank the door open and charge into the twilight. My bare feet slice into blades of grass. My bare ass cheeks clench at the chill in the air. I don't get far before I'm hit.

Right in the junk.

A cloud shifts and an errant sun ray warms my right testicle. To the everyday man, this would be a pleasant

tingle. Might even give him a stiffy first thing in the morning.

It is not morning. Night has fallen.

I am not a man. I am a vampire.

And the sun just kicked me in the nuts.

I drop to my knees and cup my jewels. Cursing that fucking star in the sky.

CHAPTER TWO

*E*_{ari}

I'VE SCALED a volcano and could barely feel the heat. I've hiked the Arctic tundra hardly sensing the cold. I even tried that walk-on-glass thing. I didn't feel the glass pierce my bare feet. But damn was the cleanup of the tiny shards in my toes a whole lot of mess to deal with afterward.

But that's me these days. I walk around with my entire body pretty much numb. Cold, hot, sharp? They're all dull. So light rarely penetrates me.

I do what every child knows not to do. I look directly into the sun. It couldn't possibly cause any more damage.

But the sun has set. The bright rays sinking beneath the horizon. It can't hurt me. Nothing can.

I've been on over a dozen skydiving jumps in the months since my dad died. That's only half of the required number of jumps for a night jump license. Meaning technically I'm not qualified to be up here staring out of the open door of a plane after the sunset, preparing to jump. Luckily, the amount of money I have in the bank bests my lacking qualifications.

My trust fund money also gets the pilot to fly over my family's estate rather than the approved drop zone. I am by no means a spoiled brat. Neither of my siblings are either. Our father taught us the value of every dollar that was put into our accounts. My brother Arneis parlayed his inheritance into a career of community service. My sister Marechal turned her coin and her consideration toward science.

Me? Well, I'd only just turned twenty-one when my dad died. I was on the cusp of figuring out what I wanted to do with my life when it all turned upside down.

I tug at my safety harness, the only thing that gives me a sense of security these days. My equipment has already been checked and double-checked. They've outfitted me with a lighted altimeter so I'll know when to deploy the chute. I also receive a flashlight and a whistle. The weather is a go with not a storm cloud in sight.

Looking down, all is dark. The sight below me is a disappointment. I hoped my childhood memories would flood back to my mind and make my heart swell with nostalgia. But it isn't like walking the vineyard while atop my dad's shoulders. I can't see much of anything except dark clumps and rows.

Still, the adrenaline rushing through me at being in the air can't be beat. I feel. I *can* feel. In the air is the only time sensation visits me.

I revel in it. There are no decisions to make. No one I'll hurt. There is only the wind and the warmth. Why can't this feeling last forever?

But it can't. No matter how high I go the ground always comes at me.

I can buy another flight. I can take another dive into the abyss. But I can't buy more time in the free fall. My father's money can't give me any more time with him. All I want is to stretch out the last second when my dad was alive and still with me.

I know the numbness will return as soon as my feet touch land. The indecision. The lack of direction. The emptiness. The guilt. The shame.

I shouldn't be here in this plane. I shouldn't be here in the clouds. I should be in the ground with him. But I survived the crash without a scratch.

I stand now, strapped into a safety harness and prepare to jump out of a perfectly good airplane. I don't step out of the plane. I take a running leap. My swan dive might resemble a swan song. It's not, though. This won't be my last performance in the air.

I'll land on the ground. Not a scratch on me. Again.

And then I'll do it again. And probably again. I don't know what else to do.

I free-fall, finding something close to joy in the temporary sensations that wake up my body and brain. Maybe if I could make this last a few more minutes I could figure out what to do with my life.

Too late. My time is already up. The altimeter lights up, alerting me that it is time to deploy the chute.

I hesitate, my thumb lingering over the button. I know death isn't the answer. Just these few seconds that separate life from death. That's where I want to live.

I'll land and let the numbness take me tonight. Tomorrow I'll look for another adventure. One that lasts longer in that stretch between life and death. But first I have to survive this landing. Too bad my fingers are numb.

The air slapping me in the face tries to nudge me into action. Finally, I press the button to release the chute. There is the telltale whirring as the chute releases from my pack. Then the normal jerk followed by a tug as the fabric unfolds. That jerk of the harness signals to my body that the warm sensation is coming to a close; like an elevator announcing landing on the ground floor.

I feel the jerk of the harness that holds my parachute. Then it loosens. Wait? That's not supposed to happen.

The binds of the harness go slack and let me go. The last thing in this world that makes me feel safe has let me down. Now that the tension of the rope is gone I feel bereft, lost.

I'm truly going down. The chute flaps in the air above me. A white flag flailing in surrender.

This is it. This is actually it. I'm going to die.

No.

That can't be right.

I'm invincible. I survived a fatal car crash without a scratch. I've been on over a dozen jumps. I walked a freaking volcano in sandals. I swam with fucking sharks while on my damn period.

Skydiving is the only place I find any peace. No. This is not going to be taken from me. I'm not going out like this.

There's still the reserve parachute. I reach for the catch, but my fingers fumble. The ground is approaching so fast. Will I even have time to open the reserve?

My fingers find the release. The second chute shoots from my pack. There is no jerk of my harness. There is no plume spread over my head like a halo.

For the first time in a year, I feel fear. The second chute has failed. The fabric blows in the wind like a sinking kite. I am the string, dangling from the end. Only unlike a flyaway kite, the chute and I are falling fast to the earth.

This is it. This is the end. I'm going to die. No seatbelt, no harness, no nothing will save me.

Without the balance of the chute, I begin to tumble head over feet. The ropes tangle my limbs until I can't move. I am bound and headed for the ground.

I try to force my eyes shut. But the wind keeps my lids open. I don't want to see this. I don't want to witness another death, not even my own.

But I have no choice. My demise is fast approaching. I can almost make out the young buds on the vines. My blood will taint the crops. Marechal will be pissed that I ruined her hybrids. Arneis will be put out that my death will make

the local news. It won't likely help either of my siblings; Marechal for business, Arneis for the polls.

Damn. Even in my death, I will hurt them.

Just before impact, I am granted one blessing. My eyes shut as I await the crash.

CHAPTER THREE

*H*adrian

“THANK you for choosing Sorority Chicks Hauling Ass for your moving needs today, Mr. Serrano.”

I take the clipboard from the chick-in-charge. Her demeanor does remind me of a chicken. Small blonde head with tail feathers drooping over her ass. I think those particular decorative feathers are called Daisy Dukes; short shorts that could double as a thong. Her breasts are large enough to make a succulent Sunday dinner.

I scrawl my name on the dotted line, remembering to write using English characters instead of the Roman ones I grew up with. Luckily, the name I go by in this day and age doesn't contain any of the letters that hadn't come into existence during the height of Rome.

“That vintage chair looks like something out of the Spanish Inquisition,” she says.

So, the sorority chick's IQ is a few sizes bigger than her tits. The chair is straight out of the Inquisition; a souvenir from my time in those dungeons where I elicited

confessions from sinners, and sometimes the innocent depending on my mood and what I'd eaten the prior day.

It was once known as a Chair of Torture. Its main feature was a set of spikes at the back. I was more fond of using the wrist ties to hold my victims still while I went about my business. I kept a gaping hole in the seat where other torturers would use hot coals. In my former line of work, I found that a strip of velvet, or a wet tongue, or a sculpted dildo got far more confessions. Orgasms loosened lips far more than singed and torn skin.

"Are you building a Red Room of Pain?"

I can see the chick's dark nipples staring back at me through the translucent shirt. I'm not interested. Not that her double G's aren't impressive. Another man would surely be impressed. Undoubtedly the one who hired her would. I'll point her in Gaius' direction, after I murder him for this latest stunt.

These chicks should have been done with the job of moving crates and boxes into my new home hours ago. But here it is after sunset and they are struggling to bring down the last object.

My patience at an end, I go over and tip the dolly forward. I don't need the wheeled device to lift the crate. I also don't need or want the sorority chicks to see my strength. I especially don't need any more tits hardening in my direction. Unfortunately, I do not get my wish.

I get the box down easily enough. But the crate door slides open revealing its contents. There is a chorus of feminine gasps that remind me of the chirps of chicks hungry for seed.

Inside the confines of the wooden box is another wooden frame. At one end of the frame is a roller where hands would be bound. A fixed bar sits at the other end where legs would be fastened. The apparatus was used to stretch the body until its victim spilled the truth. Or had all their bones broken. Whichever came first.

Back in my time, a rack would elicit nothing but shrieks of terror. That is until I got my victims rolling on it. Then the mind would bend as I took them through the paces of sweet agony and bitter pleasure. My hands knew exactly what buttons to press to give toe-curling pleasure as well as back-cracking convulsions.

"Can Mr. Grey see me now?" says one sorority chick. Her question is followed by wanton giggles from the rest of her brood.

These women do not know what they're asking for. In this new world, spending a night with a Dom is a bucket list item for most. They do not know who they're dealing with. I was a libertine before de Sade. I was a rake before Casanova. I had the hip swivel down before that jailhouse rocking singer in a jumpsuit. But unlike all those men, my submissives never left my dungeon.

Save one.

And she is the reason all of these toys are going into the cellar below my new home and not put to use in some brightly colored day room.

"I've left a tip," I say as I usher the sorority chicks out of the door.

"I bet I could earn a larger one," says the head chick.

There is a Pear of Anguish tucked into the rack. With a twist of the knob, the petals of the device expand in the mouth to cut off the voice and the air passages. The Pear is the precursor to the modern day ball gag. I'd threaten this woman with it but I'm sure it would only get her feathers wet.

Instead of using a device, I stare into the chick's eyes. It doesn't take much more than a nudge to push the suggestion in her mind that I remind her of her chemistry professor, the one whose shriveled cock she got down on her knees and sucked. Then he still gave her a D in the course. The memory gets her in her truck and she hauls her ass off my property and into the night.

I am alone with my solitude at last. I lock the door to the cellar, shutting off that part of me, and step out into the night. The ground is still warm from the setting sun. I can almost feel the heat as I take a walk across my family's new enterprise and once again leave my old life behind.

The devices are a reminder, not that I could ever forget. Domitia loved being strapped into the Chair of Torture with her wrists bound and her legs spread wide. I'd pull orgasm after orgasm from her until she begged me to yank out one more. I'd stretch her body over the rack and fuck her until she passed out. Pain turned to pleasure until we fell into oblivion. But that life is over.

The grapes of our new vineyard are just starting to bud. Winter cold has given way to spring delights. The vines struggle a bit as they've been taken out of their native soil of Italy and transplanted in this foreign land. This is exactly how my second life with her began.

Domitia compelled me to follow her the last night of my human life. Her fangs on my neck were more exquisite than any orgasm. A vampire's bite is akin to ecstasy, if done right. And Domitia performed expertly.

I was so enraptured with her that I didn't begrudge the fact that I was dying. I was certain she loved me when she cut open the flesh at her heart to rejuvenate me. She fed me her blood and brought me back to life; a life of darkness and pain when she slipped through my fingers, out the door, and into the light of the sun.

I haven't touched a woman in nearly two hundred years. Domitia had been my last. She would be my only. I owed her that much since I couldn't save her.

Outside the moon has taken command in the sky. Stars twinkle. Clouds move with no hurry. Except one.

That particular cloud moves fast as a storm readying to break through and pelt the ground with a downpour. But there is no rain in the forecast. The cloud moves south instead of to the east or west. It is coming straight at me.

And it has legs. Because it is a woman falling from the sky.
And she is falling fast.

CHAPTER FOUR

*E*ari

I STARTED DOING adrenaline adventures shortly after we buried my father. At first, the trips were low-risk enough. In fact, the experiences were therapy.

I wouldn't get behind the wheel of a car for weeks after the crash. A therapist suggested exposure therapy. For my first session, I went on a race track and had a professional race car driver take me around the circular track. By the time he pulled back into the pit, I was squirming in my seat and clutching at the seatbelt.

I returned later and had the hot race car driver drive me around the track at top speed. It was the speed that revved my engines. The knowledge that we could crash at any time--that was what made me come back to life. The moment he pressed the brake, I started to cool. By the time he cut the engine and loosened his seatbelt to try to make out, I was cold. I bought a Miata the next day.

Unfortunately, speed soon lost my interest. There is only so fast a car could go. Height became my new drug of choice. But even skydiving had begun losing that initial thrill. Once I land I go numb quicker and quicker.

Except now.

After my parachute and my spare fail, I close my eyes and await impact. Hitting the ground isn't as painful as I'd thought it would be. In fact, it feels only as if I've been tossed up in the air and caught. Caught by a strong set of arms.

Arms I wouldn't mind snuggling into. Arms I wouldn't mind hitting the brakes for. Arms that make me feel I'm still falling from the sky, but at the same time safe, secure, and warm.

I chance to open my eyes only to find I am being cradled in the arms of the most beautiful man I've ever seen. The feel of his hands wrapped around me keeps my blood hot. Even though we aren't skin to skin, goosebumps are everywhere.

My fingertips feel singed inside my protective gloves. My nipples are tight points that could've cut through the layers. Is that his hand on my ass? Between my thighs, my core is hot even in the cool air of the night.

Even if it is his hand and not the harness on my ass there is nothing I can do. I am bound in my harness and the cords of the defunct chute. Yet somehow, I feel safe, content, and totally at peace at this moment of my demise.

Death has me in his clutches and there is nothing I can do about it. My adrenaline spikes higher. But there is no fear.

Fuck, I am truly messed up in the head.

"Am I dead?" I ask.

Death doesn't answer. His gaze is locked on mine. But I can see his pupils are dilated and roving over my features. I feel as if a dangerous predator has me over a boiling pot of water. Or rather, is about to stretch me over a raging fire. And for some reason, I don't seem to mind.

The way he's looking at me, I'm ready to bare my soul to his light eyes. His hair is the color of midnight and falls just above his shoulders in gentle waves. He has one of those

patrician noses of a Roman sculpture, but it looks as though his nose has been broken a few times. The imperfection just makes him look all the more perfect. If this is what the Grim Reaper looks like I bet more women would be jumping out of airplanes.

Realizing that I'm in the Grim Reaper's clutches makes me realize another thing. There's someone else I want more than the one who holds me in his arms. "Will you take me to see my father?"

"Where's your father?"

His voice is like syrup on honey mixed in sweet wine. I want to shiver, but my body doesn't want to move a muscle inside his embrace.

"Wait?" I ask, the fear creeping back into me. "Is this heaven or hell?"

Again, he doesn't answer. There's a quirk at the corner of his mouth. It could be considered a grin, but it's there and gone in an instant.

"I suppose with what I did I probably ended up in hell," I say. "But this looks like a vineyard."

"It is a vineyard."

"Are you the devil?"

His lips break wide. I get a flash of teeth, white, gleaming, sharp. "I have been called that in the past. This is the Serrano vineyard."

"Serrano? The Serranos bought the old Palmezzo Vineyard."

"We did," he nods.

"It's a couple of miles over from my family's vineyard."

"Your family?"

"The Durands. I'm Carignan Durand."

"Hello, Carignan Durand. I'm Hadrian Serrano."

"Hadrian, that's nice." I smile as I use his first name and not his last.

He doesn't look old enough to be a Mr. Serrano. I wonder if it's his father that bought the vineyard. He did

say family.

We stand there in silence for a moment. The crickets chirp, singing their mating call as they search for companionship for the night. A coyote howls at the moon in search of a booty call. An owl hoots into the wind, calling for some action of its own. All sounds of life and not what one would expect to hear in Hell.

"So, I'm not dead?" I ask.

CHAPTER FIVE

*H*adrian

I HAVE A SPECIAL TALENT. I can always identify someone who grew up on or worked for a vineyard. Even before I was turned. The smell of the vines seeps into their very pores. It was a different smell than a drunk's or wine enthusiast's smell. Those people only made contact with the berries. The others, the children of the vineyard, they had the sweet smell of berries, the tart taste of the vine, the pungent smell of the earth in their skin beneath their nails.

So she isn't a fallen angel. She is a human and one who has grown up or worked around here by the smell of her.

She's slight. About fifty kilos or so. Her limbs are long and slender, like a gazelle. Her ass is a handful. I only know because that's how she lands.

I had to jump into the air to catch her. I know wine better than physics, but I do know enough to know that at the speed she was falling her bones would've broken if she'd landed in my arms from a fall that high. Her eyes were closed on the fall and so she didn't see that she was still in the air when I caught her.

Her shoulders are cradled inside my right forearm. Her ass right in the palm of my left hand. I fight the urge to squeeze, to test the plumpness of her flesh. Then I am surprised at my impulse. I've never groped anyone besides Domitia.

The fallen gazelle opens her eyes and I take in a breath. I see her perfectly in the dark; flushed pink cheeks, pert nose, and eyes a hazy color of cinnamon that reminds me of Chianti.

Her brows squish together as she tries to get a good look at me in the pale moonlight.

"So, I'm not dead?"

I don't answer her. I can't. My gaze is fastened on her lips. The bright, vibrant, pulsing red line where there is a split at the center.

The smell of her warm blood curls up into the space between us. It is a sweetness I haven't smelled in a long time. Adrenaline mixed with blood. Sweet blood.

It is an aphrodisiac to vampires. It was my drug of choice during the Inquisition. I'd bind my victims with rope. Toying with them, torturing them, keeping them on that tightrope between pain and pleasure until their blood was the perfect blend for my tastes. But never have I smelled anything like this. Sweet blood from a child of the vines.

She thinks she is dead. Makes sense. She fell from the sky. And now she's in the clutches of a predator, one who hasn't had a drink from the veins in a very, very long time.

I'm hungry. Not just in my veins. A tendril of something is stretching up inside of me, awaking after a long slumber. I'm not sure what it is? But I have felt it before.

I have a new possession in my hands. I want to hold on to it. I want to protect it. I want to own it. More than likely, I'm just hungry.

"I can't believe I'm still alive," Carignan says.

She squirms in my arms. Reflexively my hands tighten on the delicious bundle. I don't need to hold her so tight. She

couldn't get away if I set her down. She is bound in ropes. They crisscross her chest, her torso, and her long legs. A bondage present delivered from the heavens to a sadist.

My throat waters. My pants tighten. I nearly drop her at the unfamiliar sensations. My dick hasn't gotten hard in a century. No, not even in wet dreams.

The only person I dream of is Domitia. Anytime she appears in my dreams there is no pleasure. Only pain in her eyes when I fail to save her.

"Did I hurt you?" Carignan asks.

I want to laugh, to eat, and possibly fuck, all at the same time. Instead, I can only gape. She thought she'd hurt me? My life has been nothing but pain. This tiny human can't even prick my skin much less harm me.

"God, I couldn't live with myself if I hurt another living soul."

Well, she is safe there. Technically, I am alive. There is a debate about whether or not I still have my soul.

"I'm fine," I say, needing to assure her for some reason. "I'm not the one who fell from the sky."

"My chute malfunctioned. And then my spare as well. All the odds are against that happening, you know. I should be dead."

My fingers tighten around her. The hell is death taking anything else from me.

Not that she is mine.

So why am I not putting her down?

She gazes up at me; lost and vulnerable. This time I feel a definite twitch in my loins.

My fangs stab at my gums. I am suddenly thirsty. Even though I raided our stash of bagged blood earlier.

"You're trapped," I say.

Carignan looks down, noticing the harness and the ropes twining her arms and legs. She doesn't fight her captivity. Her body relaxes as though she's safe.

She is not.

"You're bleeding," I say. "I'm taking you inside."
The real question is will I allow her back out.

CHAPTER SIX

*E*ari

WOULD this be the next rush I'd chase? Getting kidnapped by hot men who prowl vineyards in the night waiting for crazy chicks to fall from the sky? If so, it's not the worst way to spend a Friday night.

He's carrying me through the vineyards. I should tell him that I can walk. I'm not hurt. Once again, not a scratch on me as death ignores my knocking.

But I don't tell Hadrian that. I don't ask to be put down. Because since I've been in his arms I haven't stopped feeling.

Sensations are running all over my body, even though I'm still strapped into the harness and the cords of the defunct parachute crisscross my arms and legs. So I keep quiet as he holds me close and walks towards the grand house that sits at the entrance to the vineyard.

"Tell me," Hadrian says. "Why would a human being jump out of a perfectly good airplane?"

I almost open my mouth and tell him the truth. That it is the only way I can feel anything. But I don't want him to think I am crazy... Crazier.

"I wanted to see the vineyard at night from up high."

It was a crazy idea to begin with. To try and recapture what it was like when I was a girl and my dad would lift me onto his shoulders and walk through our vineyard. But I'm full of nothing but crazy ideas these days.

Hadrian walks into an opened back door. The room is not a foyer. It's not a den. It's a bedroom. When he turns on the light, I get the sense it's *his* bedroom.

There are no pictures on the walls. In fact, the room is pretty sparse. There's only an oakwood chest next to a walk-in closet. There are no curtains, just blackout blinds that don't let in a hint of the moonlight we just stepped out of. The main feature in the room is a queen-sized bed fit for a king with a blood-red comforter and black silk pillows. The bed is made, I note.

"There are ladders," he says. "There are rooftops."

I stare at him in confusion. We are face to face since he still hasn't put me down. I know that when he finally does he'll have at least a foot on me. I hope that moment is far in the future. I like the air up here.

"To see the vineyard from up high," he says.

Oh. Right. We're back on my crazy.

Hadrian sits me down on his massive bed. My breath catches and my lips part as he crowds over me. His gaze slips to my lips and I see his nostrils flare.

Does he want to kiss me?

He could kiss me.

He could do anything he wants to me in my current predicament, bound as I am.

There is a tearing sound. At first, I think it's my breasts popping out of my shirt because my nipples are hard enough to cut through glass. But it's not my drill bits. He's breaking the ropes from the chute with his bare hands.

One by one they snap. That should not be possible. But neither should his game-winning catch of my body, either.

I gaze into his eyes. I can see them clearly now. They are the pale green of a white grape, the most common variety. But his are the seedless kind. I can't see his pupils now that we are in artificial light. Looking into his fathomless depths I feel like I'm falling.

"I think I might be invincible," I say.

I don't mean to say that. I've never told anyone my suspicions of being unbreakable.

Hadrian pulls the straps on my shoulders free. But he holds me in place with his gaze. My body is free, but I feel pinned. His fingertips brushing down my forearms are my new harness and I've never felt more secure.

"I should have died from that fall," I say.

"True."

"But here I am."

"You assume you're not in danger with me?"

I notice the accent now. Most of his responses have been monosyllabic. The cultured sound of his full sentence of words roll over me like honey.

I know I am in danger from that tilt of his lips. From the sparkle in his clear, green eyes. It's hypnotic.

"You make me feel warm," I admit.

OMG. How do I turn this thing called my mouth off? It just keeps going. Telling this stranger all of my secrets.

"I jumped out of that perfectly good airplane to feel warm," I say.

"I'm given to believe it's cold up there in the sky," Hadrian says. "Though I've never stepped out for a walk there, myself."

I can't place his accent. Not quite Spanish. He doesn't roll his R's. Italian, maybe? He has that rumble in the back of his throat with consonants. Definitely somewhere in Europe.

"Why are you cold?" he asks.

"My dad died," I say. "In a car accident. I was with him in the passenger seat. I survived without a single scratch. But

now I'm numb. The only time I feel anything is when my life is in danger. So I've been doing adrenaline adventures. It makes me feel alive, warm. And then, when the danger is over, it all goes away."

There is no judgment in his eyes. He simply listens like he has all the time in the world. I like the way his gaze holds mine. For the first time in a year, it's as though someone actually hears me.

"Do you feel cold now?" he asks.

"No. I don't. I still feel warm. In my hands. My toes. My chest. In my..."

I bite my tongue. There is no way I'm gonna tell him that I am warm between my thighs. Hadrian smiles as though he knows where my mind just went.

"I feel warm everywhere," I settle on. "Why is that?"

"Perhaps your life is still in danger," he says.

"You won't hurt me."

His gaze slips then. I feel like he's cut me loose. I blink rapidly a few times, trying to catch my bearings as the world comes back into focus. He is still all I see.

His green gaze is on my lips. His hand reaches towards me. He presses his thumb across my lip.

Quick as a snake after an apple, my tongue strikes out. I meet the salt of his flesh but also taste the metallic tint of my blood on my lip.

CHAPTER SEVEN

*H*adrian

I'VE MET my fair share of masochists over the centuries. Most masochists, and sadists for that matter, aren't born this way. We don't come out of the womb and get a rise at that first smack on the ass. But the proclivity does exist in every living creature.

It's that fight or flight impulse that kicks on when the prey senses danger. That rush of adrenaline that floods our system. For some, it's the rush and not the danger or the pain that they seek. Still, they have to go through the danger and the pain to get to that hit.

Domitia was a master at turning on that switch. For decades, I watched her break down brutes and build up weaklings. When she was done with them, they all craved her nails at their throats, her heel in their back, her fangs in their hearts.

Carignan, the little gazelle in my snare isn't exactly weak. There is a strength to her, but it's buried deep. I can see it, right there behind the sadness in her eyes. Within

her lies steel, a formidable spirit that would shine bright if she let it out.

I want to break her. I want to watch her face contort from the precipice of pain, only to dive into the abyss of ecstasy. I want to hear her scream from a high pitch that then reaches a low register of pleasure. I want to make her body twitch away from a cane or blade--no, a strap--only to inch closer when my tight knots loosen.

I want... her.

I back away from Carignan, breaking the trance I put her in. She blinks rapidly, trying to find her bearings. I do the same.

I have never wanted any woman but Domitia. Not even when I was a pubescent young man watching the grape pickers fornicate in my father's vineyard. I never lusted after one of the village girls. I always knew that something more awaited me.

That something, that someone, is not this daredevil damsel. Not a human with a death wish, because that's certainly what Carignan Durand's adventures will get her. Especially this latest venture of sitting before a starved vampire while the sweet scent of arousal wafts from between her thighs.

I could have her pussy stripped and bared in under a second. I doubt I'd need to compel her to do it. She wants it. Just as she wanted to tell me all her dark secrets.

Yes, she'd spill that honey right onto my fangs if I asked.

I wouldn't. I won't. I am just... amused that I can still get it up. Decades of nothing and now her.

The blood on her lip has dried. It's still warmer and fresher than what I drank from the bag earlier. I should clean that wound for her. She hasn't seemed to notice that she has split her lip. It's the least I can do.

I brush my thumb across her lip, gathering the small amount of fluid that breached her full bottom lip. Her pink tongue darts out and strikes my thumb.

Now it's my turn to blink rapidly. Now it's my turn to struggle to find my bearings. Now it's her spell that I am under.

My brain tells me to wipe the blood on my trousers and not on my tongue. She is not for me. My victims are always faceless, their bodies just blood in a bag.

The monster in me wins out. Animal instincts bring my thumb to my mouth. My tongue latches on and takes every molecule of her blood. I swallow it down and my fangs sharpen.

I remember the first time I saw fireworks. The explosions had startled and then thrilled me. Carignan Durand's taste explodes in my mouth setting off tiny bombs of sense and sensation.

Her blood is tepid. If it was warm it would taste like ambrosia.

"I can't believe I just told you all that," she says.

I put my thumb behind my back like I'm a naughty little boy hiding the cookie he's just stolen from the cookie jar. "People say I have a trusting face."

Carignan narrows those honey-wine eyes at me. "No, they don't."

I can't help but like her. A little. "It'll be dawn soon. I need to get you home."

"You're sending me away?"

The pout on her face sparks something in my chest. "Do you want to stay?"

She scoots back on my bed, shifting the sheets with the movement of her ass. Later, when she is gone, I will rest my face right in that spot. If I'm lucky, I'll dream of the sweet vineyard I could've run through between her thighs. Right now, it's as though she finally realizes she is prey.

"No," she says. "I just..." She hugs herself, rubbing at her forearms as though cold is settling in. "I don't want this feeling to go away."

Right. The sensations. The warmth of skydiving. The adrenaline that is still coursing through her veins because, unbeknownst to her, there is a monster that wants to devour her flesh.

"Maybe next time you'll do something safer," I say. "Like a plank walk."

"Plank walk? Like a pirate?"

"No," I grin. "Pirates are dangerous. There was a man who walked between two buildings some time ago. He was a Frenchman, so it can't be too dangerous."

I am joking. I haven't joked in centuries. The way she looks at me I can see that she is considering it.

"Don't." I put the command in my voice, but I sense her resistance.

I was right. Carignan is strong-willed. I enjoy her pushback for a second. I want to take a bite out of that supple ass of hers. I could string her up on my four-poster bed with the ropes she was wrapped in when she fell into my arms. I could suspend her wet pussy over my mouth and--

"You sound like my brother," she says.

"I am definitely not your brother." Not with the things I want to do to her. Things I hadn't even thought of for centuries.

Carignan wanted to be bound in a harness? She liked heights? She wanted to be pushed to the edge? Oh, the things I could do with her with the rope left from her failed parachute.

My dick is definitely hard now. Instead of tapping into that desire, shame washes over me. What am I doing desiring another woman when I failed to save the love of my life?

The possibility of death makes Carignan feel alive. But the thought of living another day makes me feel shame. The little daredevil and I are on different paths. Best I set her on her way.

I latch onto her eyes. She gazes back at me, not hiding what she's thinking, what she wants. She doesn't fight my suggestion this time. No, I fight my own resolution.

Still, I push the thought into her head. She is out in an instant. I catch her body before she hits the mattress. But have I made a new mistake?

Carignan is now helpless in my arms. I could do to her whatever I want. No one would know.

I rise with her in my arms as I walk to the head of the bed. Taking a seat, I settle down onto the mattress, cradling her in my lap, making sure to sit her away from my erection.

The crack in her lip offers no more sacrament. Her head rests against my chest. Her nose presses against the place my heart would be if I still had one. I don't know how long I sit there watching her breathe. The first rays of sunlight creep along the horizon when I reach for the phone and dial.

"I thought it would take you much longer to call."

There is delight in the voice on the other end. It makes my skin crawl. The creature on the receiving end of my call is the biggest predator in hundreds of miles.

"I need a favor," I say.

There is a soft chuckle. Likely the sound the lion makes before it takes down a buffalo. "I'll need something in return."

I hang up the phone. I should prepare her, but I am not yet ready to let her go. It would just be the one time I tell myself. I am a beast, after all. This is my nature.

I am a bastard for doing it. But I can't help myself. I dip my head to hers. Gently, as tenderly as I know how, I take hold of her bottom lip with mine.

I do not bite. I do not suck. I simply press my lip to hers.

Carignan does not stir. This is no fairytale. She is Sleeping Beauty, but despite my moniker, I am no Prince. All I bring anyone is pain.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*E*_{ari}

"THE PERSON who rides in the back seat does not have to be strapped in."

"Y-y-yes, they d-d-do."

My right eye twitches but doesn't open. I shift against my pillow but can't seem to get comfortable. The pillow is firm. And covered in leather and not the cotton liner I'd bought for it the other week. The television is too loud. Which is weird because I never sleep with it on.

"No, they doin't. Only them in the front."

What had I been watching before I'd fallen asleep? The BBC? Was Masterpiece Theater showing some period drama? It appeared to be something set in Scotland. Or maybe it was an Irish comedy? I'd never been any good with accents.

"I'm g-g-googling it."

Googling? There was no Google in the Victorian time period. Definitely not during the time of the highlanders.

Am I actually dreaming? Or is the television on AMC Classics? Yes, that has to be it. Because these men definitely

don't sound like any rugged highlanders. They sound more like the Three Stooges or maybe the Three Leprechauns.

I hear the slaps and grunts of physical comedy as I struggle to come awake. When I open my eyes I don't see Larry, Curly, and Mo. What I'm seeing is just too weird to describe. And it's not on TV.

The sun is rising in the sky out the window. I'm in a car. A moving car.

In the front seat, the guy with the accent is in the driver's seat. Beside him, sits a tall, thin man. The thin man has his phone out, his slender fingers are tapping furiously over the face of the phone.

A man with gray hair, but a young face sits beside me in the backseat. He has his seat belt on. I look down to see that my belt is fastened securely across my chest. The gray-haired man gives me a weary smile.

"Th-th-there," says passenger seat guy. "It says it right here in G-g-google. Children up to s-s-sixteen must wear their b-b-belts."

"Is the lass over sixteen?" asks the driver.

The driver's gaze lifts and regards me in the rearview mirror. The man beside him turns his head, nearly all the way around without moving his shoulders, like a human owl.

"Well, are you, lass?" asks the driver.

"Of course she is," says the man beside me. "Do you think the Prince of Pain would tussle with a child?"

The two men in the front seat look dubious. I am utterly confused. Who is the Prince of Pain? Who are these three? How did I get here? Where are they taking me?

"I doin't know," says the driver. "Were those Hadrian's proclivities in the past?"

Hadrian.

The image of him rushes back to the front of my mind. His dark hair. His crystal clear green eyes. His sultry smile.

The memories flood back all at once. I bolt up, wide awake. The seat belt doesn't allow me to get too far. My body is alert and warm from just the mention of his name.

I fell from the sky. He caught me. He stared at my lips. And then... nothing.

The memories are jerky and jumbled from there. Did I tell him he made me feel warm? Did I lick his thumb? Oh god, what else did I do?

The last thing I remember is being with him, inside his arms. Feeling safe, secure, warm. So how did I wind up here kidnapped by these three stooges?

"Let me out," I demand.

"Don't worry, lass," says the driver. "We will."

Was this blackmail? Did they expect a ransom? My family is wealthy, but we've never been on the radar for kidnappers. Maybe this has something to do with my brother's political career? My sister has been in the papers with her scientific breakthroughs in grape hybrids.

"We're just a few miles away," says the man beside me.

"Where are you taking me?" I demand.

"To your apartment."

Wait? What? "You're kidnapping me to my own home?"

"No. No. We're driving you home from Hadrian's," says the man beside me. "He... well, he couldn't take you himself. So he asked us to do it."

"You're friends of Hadrian's?"

"No, not friends exactly. More like business associates... of his business associate."

That was a head-scratcher. But still, "Why would Hadrian send three men to take me home instead of calling an Uber?"

"You shouldna ever get into the car with strangers," says the driver, whose name I do not know and whose face I've never seen before.

I give him a telling look.

"We're entirely safe," the driver assures me.

They all nod earnestly. And I *am* wearing my seatbelt.

Did I fall asleep back at Hadrian's? It must have been the adrenaline from nearly dying, for real this time. I usually napped after any adventure sport.

I don't feel tired now. I'm still full of energy. I can't believe I fell asleep in front of Hadrian. No wonder he sent me away and asked his friends of friends to do it for him.

Man, I have no game when it comes to men. Never had. Maybe because I've never actually been interested in one before. Not any of the adrenaline junkies I hang with. Not the responsible instructors or guides. Not the safe boys in my prep school or the frat boys in college.

But after just a few moments with Hadrian and I had tingles all up and down my spine. Yes, it might have something to do with the fact that I fell into his arms after nearly dying. But the way he looked at me, like he saw straight into the heart of me. I've never experienced anything like that before.

There's still a tingle in my fingertips and on my bottom lip where he brushed his fingers. But the sensations are all fading away under the dawn's new light, like the sun's rays are burning them away.

"Tell me about him?" I ask no one in particular.

"Who? Hadrian? Trust us, lass. He's not exactly the kind of creature you want to get involved with."

"Creature?" I ask.

The backseat guy smacks the front seat guy in the back of the head. The driver takes his hand off the wheel to reach back and sock the gray-haired young man. The thin passenger seat man tries to break it up. Somehow we don't swerve into oncoming traffic.

"It's a figure of speech," says the driver once all things are settled down. "I'm Irish. Name's Declan, by the way."

"I'm Parker," says the guy beside me. "And that's Laurie." He points to the passenger seat guy. "What Declan

means is that Hadrian has certain... tastes that aren't for a girl like you."

"A girl like me?"

Laurie clears his throat and takes over the conversation. "I've heard of your f-f-family. Love Durand wine."

I have no interest in talking about wines. "I couldn't place Hadrian's accent. Was it Irish?"

"No." Declan scowls as though I've offended his entire country.

"My bad," I say, as innocently as I can muster. "You guys sound alike."

"Impossible. He's a Spaniard."

"No," says Parker. "He was born in Italy. Then he moved to Spain for... well, you know what."

Before I can ask what what, there is another round of smacking upside the head and over armrests. I try another tactic.

"So, he owned vineyards in Italy and Spain?" I ask.

"I believe his family was in the winemaking business," says Declan. "But he left the family business for many years. He's had other less savory jobs."

"Like what?" I prod. "Like the mafia?"

I am only half-joking. The silence is a definitive punch line. So that's what was up.

"Something like that," says Parker. "You'd best to keep your distance from the likes of him."

I bite my lip. There's the metallic taste of blood at the center of my bottom lip. But beneath the leaden taste is something sweet. "Well, we live in the same city. And his property is near my family's vineyard."

The three men look at one another again, sharing more silent communication. I can't get anything else out of them for the rest of the drive. We turn a corner and pull up to my brownstone.

"Here you are," says Parker. "All safe and sound."

"You're a good girl, lass," says Declan. "If Hadrian comes to your door, don't invite him in."

"If there's ever anything you n-n-need," says Laurie, "just give us a call."

I look up at the sky. A plane soars overhead. Before last night it would've called to me. In the light of the new day, I don't focus on the airplane. I focus on the buildings it flies above.

"Well," I say, "there is something. Have you ever heard of plank walking?"

CHAPTER NINE

*H*adrian

“EVENING, Hadrian. Were you making Rocky Mountain Oysters for dinner again?”

I come into the kitchen to see my brothers already up and eating their evening meal. I don’t answer Gaius, as my balls were spared from the sun’s rays today. But my big toe did get burned.

“As a true connoisseur of *animelles*, you know I prefer bull testicles to four-hundred-year-old Italian meatballs,” Gaius continues. “The organ is best when skinned, floured, with just a bit of salt and pepper. Then deep-fried to a golden crisp and pounded flat.”

Gaius smacks his lips as he waxes poetic over the appetizer. He’s dressed in a silk robe that likely cost more than a country village in France. His aristocratic nose is high in the air, even as it belies his low birth. His long lashes and dark eyes are perpetually narrowed so no one can ever tell if he’s looking at them. Having known the man for half a millennium, I know he sees everything.

"We're out of B-Negative again," calls a voice from the kitchen.

Virius stands before the open, stainless steel refrigeration unit. The blond male who is built like his gladiator forefathers is dressed in a white toga around his hips, brown cowboy boots on his feet, and a motorcycle helmet with the visor up.

"Just drink the A-Negative," says Gaius.

"They taste nothing alike," Viri shouts through the open visor as he holds up the offensive A-Negative blood bag. "The B is bright and complex, with an earthy aftertaste. The A is sweet and creamy like sugar. You know I don't have a sweet tooth."

"Mix in some peppermint leaves. It contains iron and will give it an herby taste."

"Peppermint leaves?" Viri gags and tosses the bag back in the refrigerator. "That's like me telling you to toss back a glass of California Zinfandel."

Gaius presses his hand to his chest as though he were trying to keep the bile down. "No need to be crass. Just drink it. You both need to eat something before we go into polite society."

"Polite?" I ask. "Are you sure we're not walking into a firing squad?"

Gaius waves my comment away as though it is a gnat buzzing around his head. "What happened between Frangelico and Domitia was before our time."

I tense at the mention of her name. I know Gaius' hooded gaze catches my reaction. As always, he doesn't mention it.

"You should eat something, too," he says.

"I'm not hungry." I turn and head out of the kitchen.

"If you don't eat, you'll complain all the way there," Gaius calls after me. "I doubt Frangelico will have any bags on hand. Only live veins."

"I'll eat when we get there," says Viri.

"Are you gonna get dressed, buddy?" says Gaius.

I don't hear the rest of their conversation. However, the outcome is clear when we all exit the front door twenty minutes later. I'm in my typical wardrobe of black slacks and a black cotton shirt. Gaius is tailored to perfection in a dark blue business suit. Viri has lost the helmet and put on a colorful Hawaiian shirt. The boots and toga remain.

I take in the scenery as we drive the long, winding road that encompasses our new enterprise, the Serrano Vineyard in Patagonia. Our flagship vineyard back in Italy is two hundred years old and has earned us what amounts today to over a billion dollars. We need half that just to keep Gaius clothed and fed with his expensive tastes.

We've planted our signature Serrano grape in Spain, France, Switzerland, and even Australia. Arizona is the closest Gaius will come to the questionable soil of California. Gaius was loathe to mix our berries with the new technologies vintners on the west coast were toying with.

I didn't care. I needed a change of scenery. Too many ghosts back in the old country.

When we walk into our destination and take the private staircase down, I see a familiar scene. A woman spread eagle on the inverted cross of Saint Andrew. Her dark nipples are tight peaks that point to the ceiling. Her head lolls back in ecstasy as her master flails her naked skin.

Unbidden, the memory of my little skydiver rises in my mind. What would she look like stretched out on that cross? Or better yet, suspended in the air on ropes. Her body bound and completely at my mercy.

I shake my head to lose the thought. I'm not certain where the idea even came from. It isn't as though I'll ever see her again.

A row of bare asses salute us. Between the splayed legs are weeping pink cunts and leaking, erect dicks. Each cheek is stained pink as a leathered up Domme walks up

and down the line taking a red-striped cane to the round flesh.

I am familiar with torture. I excel at it. Only, when I did it as an art form, it was not appreciated by the victims held in the Spanish dungeons awaiting judgment.

Beside me, Viri's stomach grumbles. I doubt he's remembering our time as henchmen in the Inquisition. No, his body's needs are of the present.

"I told you to eat before we came," hisses Gaius.

"I'm hungry now," Viri says. But his gaze isn't on the open play area. It's on the bar where I can smell that fresh B-Negative is on tap.

"You'll have to wait until the meeting is over," says Gaius.

Viri sucks his teeth, but he falls in line. We make our way through the moaning humans on the floor, those screaming upon vibrating furniture, and a few panting while suspended from ropes. At the end of the room are a dais and throne. Upon the throne sits the man we are here to see.

"*Salve*," calls Lucius Frangelico from his seat on the throne.

He doesn't stand. He is king here. He holds out his arm, palm down, fingers touching. The salute was a sign of respect in ancient times. The vampire king is offering an olive branch to us today.

He turns his palm over, and I see that I am mistaken. He curls his slender fingers in a come hither motion. In my hand I hold the favor he asked for; a bottle of wine from the old country, from a time when we were all centuries younger.

Frangelico's fingers curl around the bottle and his mouth splits into a true grin. The male has always made my skin crawl. Hopefully, this vintage bottle gets me out of his debt for the favor I asked of him last night.

"Nice touch," says Gaius when I step back.

He doesn't know that I had any recent contact with the Vampire King. I'd rather keep it that way. I don't need any questions about the little human I sent away the other night. I have no plans to ever see her again.

"As I'm sure you know, we purchased a vineyard on the outskirts of town," says Gaius. "It's beyond the boundary of your nest. But we still wanted to make sure we pay our respects."

Frangelico rubs his fingers over the ancient label. The wine is not only priceless, but it's also old. It was from my parents' vineyard, making it nearly four hundred years old. His shrewd eyes get a faraway look. For someone his age, I wouldn't be surprised if his eyes rolled back in his head. When he focuses back on us, his gaze is clear.

"My friends." Frangelico stands now and addresses the crowd. "We have royalty in our midst tonight. May I present the Prince of Pain, the Lord of the Lash, and the Knight of Knives."

Viri and I bristle at those monikers from our past. Gaius, on the other hand, does a turn so that his admiring audience gets a good look at him. In turn, I see Gaius' hooded gaze take in the interested.

Most of the humans in the room are too blissed out to know what is happening. It's only the vampires and few shifters that take note. They are the only beings old enough to know what those names mean; names whispered in dark alleys, names groaned in rank dungeons, names screamed for mercy during the Spanish Inquisition.

"As you can see," says Frangelico, "your reputation precedes you."

"It's our shared past that concerns us," I say.

I'm usually the quiet one. I have no head or patience for diplomacy. That's why Gaius does all the talking for our business.

Frangelico's gaze lands on me. Like Gaius, his scrutiny is laser-sharp. Unlike Gaius, Frangelico's unblinking eyes do

not squint. I have his full, wide attention.

He knows who I am. More importantly, he knows who I loved.

"The past is dead," says Frangelico.

The hairs at the back of my neck bristle. My fingers itch to clench into fists. My fangs ache to pierce through my gums.

Gaius steps in front of me with a congenial grin. "Let not the sins of our sire be laid upon her sired. If that were the lay of the land, you'd be a dead man."

Frangelico's icy glare switches from me to Gaius. His predatory smile turns into something approaching friendly, as friendly as the smile of the scorpion who climbed upon the turtle's back to cross the river. That story ends in a murder-suicide.

"Well said, my lord," says Frangelico. "If I were held responsible for every dirty deed of my sire, I'd have been roasting in the sun for a year."

My fingers do ball into a fist now. But thoughts of hurting Frangelico leave my mind. What fills my vision is my last sight of Domitia. Her beautiful face in tears. Her hands reaching for me, begging me to come with her.

But I don't. I didn't, and she slipped through my fingers as the sun's rays consumed her body.

"We'd love to see your handiwork for ourselves," Frangelico is saying as I come back to the present.

I blink, adjusting to the lighting in the dungeon. Looking around the large open space, I see many eager women and a few males. But I no longer deal in pain. Not since the woman I loved died.

"My friends will join you," I say. "I'll be out of your way."

I have no interest or desire to socialize or be a part of paranormal politics. I just want to be left alone with my grapes at night and wake early at dusk to give a middle finger to the setting sun.

Gaius has already picked up a flogger. Viri is at the bar placing his order. I head for the door, but a hand stops me.

I turn to see Frangelico. "I can't say that I am sorry for your loss, being that Domitia tried to turn my sireds against me, steal all my wealth, and stake me. But I truly harbor no ill will to you."

"Thank you for the loan of your shifters," I say. "I consider any debt between us paid and I'll trouble you no longer."

"You know," Frangelico continued as though I had not spoken, "I have everything in the world. But the one thing I lack is a true brotherhood like the three of you have."

I look back at my brothers. We were born of different mothers in our human lives. But Domitia's blood runs through each of our veins as the woman who gave us new life. Gaius, Virius, and I stuck by each other through the dark ages instead of killing each other off like many of Frangelico and his contemporaries. But I don't bother mentioning that.

"Maybe one day we could even be friends. Fates know I could use a few after dealing with that Aleron problem."

I can only stare. Frangelico's fingers on my shoulder feel like a scorpion's bite. I shake off his touch.

Frangelico shrugs, undaunted and unconcerned. One on one he would best me. He has over a millennium on me.

"If you ever have need again, don't hesitate to reach out."

Frangelico hands me a card with his name, a phone number, and an email address on it. For a man who guards his safety, he sure has a lot of ways to get in touch. I don't want to be in touch. I just want to be left alone.

I am not the only one who desires to leave this place in a hurry and untouched. A tall man bumps into me on his way to the door. The human male turns to glare at Frangelico. I note that his eyes are the color of Chianti and I'm suddenly thirsty.

Not for him. When I did drink from veins I preferred my victims cowering in fear or screaming in pain. This man's back is so rigid, his walks so stiff, I'm certain a stick is shoved way up his ass. He'd certainly taste like cold, unsweet, black coffee from a convenience store at best.

Not like the little human who I let escape my grasp the other night.

"Leaving so soon, Durand?" Frangelico calls after the man. "Was it something I said?"

Durand? Chianti colored eyes? I turn to ask Frangelico about the man, but his shrewd gaze has left the man and taken up interest in me.

I clamp my mouth shut and school my features. Whatever is happening here is none of my concern. Frangelico smirks at me, but he says nothing as I head out into the oblivion of night. I am determined never to ask the man for so much as the time of day ever again.

CHAPTER TEN

*E*ari

THE FIRST RAY of sunlight hits my cheek. The morning is cold. The star isn't up high enough to warm me through.

Not that I could feel it in any case.

I open my eyes to see a beautiful day dawning. At 18,000 feet in the air, the view is spectacular. The sky is full of pinks and purples and oranges, like an artist dropped their paintbrushes on the floor.

Huh? That's good to know. Though I'm an unfeeling thing, I can still paint a pretty picture with my words.

I look down and my breath catches. Finally, a spark of something in me. A slight jostle in this walking corpse that is my body. The shaky breath tells me I'm still alive.

Height: it's the only thing that wakes up my senses. That and speed. Hence, being over three miles up in the air preparing to step out and take a walk on this glorious, sunny morning. Although, I would rather be in the arms of a certain tall, dark glass of wine with a proclivity to catch things that fall from the sky.

"OMG, what am I doing?" The girl next to me squeals. She's a talking texter, so I only understand about half of

what she says.

“WTF though. Sometimes you just gotta YOLO.”

I nod at her nonsensical abbreviations. I feel as though I’m being treated as a child by an adult who spells out the bad words. I’m pretty sure she’s older than me. Her hair is a riot of neon rainbow coloring, so bright it actually hurts to look at.

“We’ll be LMFAOing after this, right, Cari?” she says as she grips her pack.

Instead of talking, I raise both my thumbs. I’ve learned silence doesn’t shut her up. I’m sure she’s one of those chronic texters that will keep bubbles popping up until the other person responds. The only thing that works with a chronic texter is an emoji. Hence the head nod and thumbs up.

I step away from her wishing there was more space. My fingers are numb as I pull at my restraints. I am strapped down tight. I won’t be escaping anytime soon. All the sensation I felt yesterday after waking from my time with Hadrian has gone. I’ve come up into the sky because I need a fix and I need it bad.

The binds cross my spine, pulling my back straight. They crisscross over my breasts. The straps reach around my thighs, riding up to my crotch like a lover's caress. Or, perhaps, a possessive grip. Much like it had felt when Hadrian had carried me through his vineyard and into his bedroom. My nipples had strained for his touch.

I am not flat-chested, though the straps do their best to flatten my girls. My nipples press into my mounds. It’s not erotic. But I do feel high. I am high.

Beside me, I hear a snort.

“Sup, Cari.”

Tate wipes a speck of powder off his nose and gives me a cheeky grin. He is my age, but he looks much older. There is a strain to the light in his eyes. A permanent wrinkle mars his brow.

Tate has been on most of these adrenaline adventures with me. From bungee jumping to base jumping, from zip-lining to diving with sharks. We've done just about all of it. But for different reasons.

Tate is trying to forget his past. I'm trying to remember mine.

"You ready for this?" he asks.

I nod. Then remember I'm not speaking to Chronic Texter. "Yeah. You?"

"Always," he says, giving me a wink.

I know he's interested in me. But sleeping around isn't a risk I'm willing to take. Well, maybe with Hadrian. But definitely not with Tate the Druggie Daredevil. Condoms are probably an afterthought for a guy who engages in behaviors that could end his life.

"You look nervous," he says.

I'm not. I'm eager. Eager to get started. Eager to feel the wind on my face. To feel the air slip through my fingers. To feel the pressure drop and my heart rate increase. I am just eager to *feel*.

The two others who are with us, Chronic Texter and her porcelain skinned, kohl-eyed, black nail polish boyfriend, are both attached to tandem divers. Tate and I aren't. Like I said, it isn't our first rodeo. This is a weekly occurrence for us. While Tate was snorting up his feelings, sometimes I came twice a week. This is my drug of choice.

Not that I do any drugs. My therapist tried putting me on meds after our third session when I told her about my latest hobby of drag racing. I thought that was pretty ludicrous since she'd been the one to suggest exposure therapy in the first place.

True, she only prescribed getting in the car with a driver. Her thought was to get me back behind the wheel after the accident. What I noticed was that it wasn't driving that scared me. Nothing scares me. That is the problem.

I wait now for the others to jump, wanting a bit of the sky to myself. The Chronic Texter's and Goth Guy's panicked screams have died away. Tate's war cry echoes in my ears. And then there is silence. Just me in the clouds.

After my mom died, my dad told me she was in heaven. When I asked where that was he pointed up. I've looked up into the sky since I was a little girl and I've never seen her. But she died when I was five, so I barely remember what she looked like.

I've been coming up here for the last six months. Flying through the clouds where he told me Heaven was. But I haven't seen him either.

I step to the edge of the open doorway. I know this is crazy after what happened last night. There is a tinge of fear, but it's the anticipation that pushes me forward. Usually, I hope to hear my dad's voice in my head. To feel his arms around me as the air pushes back at my falling body. I take a deep breath and close my eyes. When I do, that's when I see Hadrian's face.

The wind hits me in the chest as I tumble through the sky. I don't fight gravity. I learned that being tense only brings pain whether you're slamming into another vehicle at sixty miles per hour, or falling through the sky at one hundred and twenty miles per hour.

And so I let go. I let go of it all. All the responsibilities I want no part of. All the cares I no longer have. All the fucks I no longer give.

The free fall continues. I know the clock is ticking. I have less than a minute before I need to deploy the chute.

Thirty seconds pass as I tumble through the sky. A bright light flashes in my eyes. It's not Hadrian's Italian tenor in my ear. I hear my dad's voice.

Forty seconds pass and I continue to accelerate. In my mind's eye, I see my dad pump the brakes of the car. But it doesn't matter.

Fifty seconds have passed as I free-fall down to the ground. The crash sounds in my ears. My father moans a sigh and then his final words.

Get free, Carignan. Live.

The wind whips about me, trying to knock some sense into my thick skull. I'm a good girl. A daddy's girl. I do what I'm told.

Finally, my fight or flight responses engage. My heart rate increases. Blood pumps through my sluggish veins.

Conscious thought turns off. My reflexes click in. My adrenaline spikes. I imagine it's like a shot of pure, undiluted heroine. I should ask Tate. He would know.

My eyes slam open. I grip my harness. My fingers search for the pull and I give it a yank.

My breath catches, wondering if it will open this time. Wondering if I want another accident. Wondering if I want to hit the ground or fall back into strong arms.

There is a jerk as the chute deploys. My harness tightens around me. It tugs at the V of my thighs, the straps giving my ass a swat. It heaves over the flesh of my breasts, giving my nipples a firm pinch.

I sail through the air in this tight cocoon of sensation. Sensations that zing up and down my legs. My breath comes in short, needy pants. I feel alive.

But the ground is fast approaching. It never lasts long enough. Already, my senses are going dull. My fingertips are numbing. My toes feel detached. Paralysis spreads down my spine. And my mind, my heart, they're becoming indifferent once more.

I kick my feet out, coming to a running stop. The fabric of the parachute falls around me, like a funeral shroud. It's over.

I am the walking dead again. I am a senseless woman. I am a lifeless corpse that survived a crash without a scratch while her father's spine was broken in three places along with massive internal damage.

In the distance, I can see Chronic Texter is tangled with her tandem diver. There are scrapes on her cheek and forehead. Her goth boyfriend moans as he holds his foot. It's likely broken. Tate takes a tumble, adding to his collection of bruises.

Once again, I walk away unscathed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*H*adrian

I PULL open the stainless steel refrigerator. The day workers we hired have restocked the shelves. The top shelf is filled with O-positive; the most common blood type of humanity. On the second shelf, there's a large stash of A-negative bags; the second most common of blood donors. In the pull out shelves which are reserved to keep fruits and vegetables crisp is a small supply of B-negative, one of the rarer blood types.

Taking a bag from the crisper, I marvel at this modern convenience of humanity. Refrigeration units are one of the few human technologies I actually enjoy. In ancient times we could never store blood outside of a live body. At least not for long. Especially not without keeping said body incapacitated.

Vampires prefer to drink from the living. When the heart stops, the blood coagulates and the consistency of the fluid becomes curdled. Much like cheese. But trust me, topping fresh fruit with clotted blood like humans do cottage cheese is not a thing for vampires.

I pour the blood bag into a coffee mug and toss it into the microwave. As I detest the taste of cold blood, the little electric oven is another favorite technological advance. Even though the radiation does make the blood taste a little funny. But it's my only option. It's too easy to scorch blood on the stovetop. Plus I hate what blood does to the pots and pans and the dishwasher.

After the beep, I remove my warmed mug. It's a bit too hot. Burning the tip of my tongue would be an annoyance that would heal in a matter of seconds, but I am thirsty. So, I blow off the steam for a few seconds before it's safe to take my first sip.

Before putting the cup to my lip, I bless the blood. Old habits die hard. I was ordained when I became an inquisitor. First by Pope Sixtus and again by Pope Paul IV.

In the old days, I feasted on heretics as I tore their flesh with whips, canes, and flails. Fear and desperation gave the blood a sweet taste, like honey wine. When a victim screamed, the blood became savory. When they wept, there was a tartness to it. But fear, fear was my favorite dish.

Humans have tortured each other since the beginning of time, all the way back to Cain. Life as a vampire wasn't hard in the middle ages with persecutions aplenty. During the Spanish Inquisition, the blood flowed in the dungeons.

I cared not for confessions, as was my charge. I went to work solely for my sustenance. If I didn't like the way someone tasted, they were guilty. If I wanted seconds at their veins, I told my superiors the accused was being stubborn and needed more time in the dungeons until I drained them dry. Only then did I turn them over for final punishment.

Burning at the stake was a mercy by the time I was done with them. Vampires didn't cry over spilled milk. But we would get put out over burned blood.

Unfortunately, the blood from the microwave is tangy, like champagne. I cringe at the thought of the bubbly

monstrosity. Packaged blood is still better than that excuse of liquid. This donor was probably some sorority girl or junior executive who drank Cosmos every happy hour.

"Good evening, Hadrian."

Gaius comes into the room dressed in the same slacks he wore last night and a few buttons missing on his designer shirt. There's a fading scratch on his chest which could've only come from a shifter. Somehow I doubt he got into a fistfight last night.

"You're up late today."

Gaius' meaning is clear. He hopes I missed my morning bout with the sun. If he looked down and saw the singe on my pinkie toe he'd know he was wrong. "You were out late. I'm surprised you trusted Frangelico to not turn you out at high noon."

"Lucius never had any quarrel with us."

"Oh, it's Lucius now? What else? Did you two braid each other's hair at your sleepover?"

Gaius pops the cork of our signature wine and pours himself a glass. "Domitia made a lot of enemies when she was alive. Many of them were before our time. You don't need to hold her grudges."

"You want me to break bread with a man who tried to kill her."

"She did start it."

I grit my teeth. It is always how these arguments go. Domitia did steal the queen's jewels, so no wonder the guards came after her. Domitia did double-cross the pirate, so no wonder the fleet came after her. Domitia did try to assassinate the Pope, so no wonder we had to give up being Inquisitors.

"It's been over two hundred years, brother. Perhaps it's time to move on."

This was always the next progression of the argument. "Death does not stop true love. It says so in that Dread Pirate Roberts movie."

"Domitia was no Buttercup," Gaius snorts. Then immediately winces. He holds up his hands in defense before I can get my hands around his neck. "I loved her, too."

"No, you didn't."

"No," he agrees, lowering his hands. "I didn't. I am grateful to her for the life she gave me. Including my new family. But she made her choice. She walked into the sun."

He was wrong again. It wasn't her choice. It was my fault. I was supposed to save her and I failed.

"You're still alive," Gaius continues. He stands and places a hand on my shoulder. His hand is a firm grip, as though he's determined to root me into this world. "One day you'll have to start living again."

I move to shrug him off. But my shoulders are too weary. My eyes feel heavy and I can't meet his gaze. He doesn't know what happened the day Domitia faced the sun. I never told anyone.

Viri lumbers into the kitchen. He glances at the two of us. His only acknowledgment is a slight head nod.

This morning he is dressed in Victorian pantaloons, an AC/DC t-shirt covering his chest, and a pair of Air Jordans on his feet. He pulls open the fridge and goes for the crisper. His hand pauses over the supply.

"Who's been in my stash?" says Viri.

"You know I don't drink from the tap." Gaius returns to his seat and his wine glass.

Viri turns to me. I can't deny it. Not when the evidence is still in my hand.

"You know that's my favorite," he says.

"I'll replace it," I say, downing the last tart droplet.

"That's not the point," says Viri. "I put my initials on it."

"Oh?" I frown. "I thought that was the donor."

"I need to move out and get my own place." Viri slams the door of the fridge shut, cradling the lot of B-negative bags in his arms.

Fat chance he'll move out. Viri is barely a functioning member of the paranormal world. He would never pass for anything close to human. Not when he couldn't even get the fashions of the century correct.

"Children," says Gaius. "Can we talk shop for a minute?"

I take a seat beside Gaius. Viri begins opening blood bags and dumping the contents into a thermos.

"I'm growing concerned about the soil content here," says Gaius. "Our grapes aren't progressing as they should."

What has kept Serrano grapes a top wine for centuries is the consistency of the taste. Our berries are the exact same from my parents' vineyard from four hundred years ago. The grapes were the only thing in my life, aside from my blooded brothers, that haven't changed.

"I'm worried the soil and the temperature are changing the taste," said Gaius.

I feel a discussion of soil pH, fertilization methods, and vine health coming on. Even though I grew up on a vineyard, handling the grapes was not my job. Nor my passion.

Gaius was born a slave. After Domitia turned us, Gaius took his newfound freedom and his knowledge of vinting to amass an empire. An empire he could wax quixotic upon for hours.

"That's not our department," I say, rising before he can get going. "You'll figure it out."

"Fine," says Gaius, glaring at my disinterest. "Just have the new barrels ready. And make sure the destemmers are clean for the harvesting."

"Since when do I not do my job?" says Viri around a mouthful of blood.

Gaius threw up his hands, clearly finished with the both of us. "My work here is done. I'm headed back to Club Toxic."

"You just got home," I say.

"Wasn't aware I had a curfew, Dad."

I give him a two-fingered salute, the Roman sign for fuck you.

Gaius rolls his eyes and straightens the cuffs of his crumpled shirt. "Fine. I'm off to the land of the living. You two can stay here stuck in the past."

Works for me. And, by the looks of Viri's Air Jordans kicked up on the table, it works for him, too.

CHAPTER TWELVE

*E*ari

SPEED LIMITS. They were just a suggestion. Right?

The sign mentioning fifty miles per hour whizzes past me as the needle of the speedometer crosses over eighty miles per hour.

I press the gas pedal of my car. The flip-flop I'm wearing dangles. It's being held between my big toe and the second one -what's that one called? The index toe? The pointer pinkie? It's not like it points to anything.

I know driving with open-toed and open-heeled shoes can be dangerous. There's always the possibility of the sandal footgear slipping between the toe thumb and the index toe and getting wedged under the accelerator. Or the brake. Which would be dangerous. Especially at excessive speeds.

A yellow sign indicating a bend in the road barely comes into focus before it's miles behind me. A second sign, indicating lowered speed is hazy as well. I take the curve with one hand on the steering wheel. The other checks the text messages popping up on my phone.

Up ahead a semi enters the highway. The driver is minding the speed limit. I should call the number on the back of his truck and let his boss know that his driving is indeed good.

Instead, I take my time running my foot from the gas pedal to the brake of my Miata. The pavement between me and the sixteen wheeler is decreasing but not my speed. My flip flop dangles between my toes.

The sixteen wheeler is in front of me now. Close enough that its wheels kick dirt directly on my windshield. A few of the tiny rocks strike my cheek. A few specks get into my hair because the top of my convertible is down.

I can smell the exhaust of the diesel fuel. I can hear the tinkling of tiny rocks rain down on the hood of the car. The paint job is probably scratched.

I jerk when the blow horn of the semi sounds into the night. It breaks me from my numbness and I brake, hard.

My chest jams into the steering wheel as the speedometer flatlines. Seatbelts are just a suggestion, too. Right?

My chest colliding with the steering wheel doesn't hurt, much. Not much can hurt me anymore. I am invincible.

I pull off my exit. As I slow the car, my heartbeat kicks up. It doesn't race. It's probably beating at a regular click, like a normal person's.

Looking out the windshield, something approaching warmth fills my chest. There are vines as far as the eye can see. They are arranged in neat rows. Equidistant apart. Equidistant in height.

My father would have it no other way. He was meticulous about this vineyard. When he wasn't at the breakfast table in the morning, he could be found out in the vineyard, picking grapes before the first worker showed up.

Gazing out at the fruit of his labors brings me joy. Though the feeling is only lukewarm. My emotions are a tea kettle left on a cool burner. I need a spark to heat them up.

But I'm on the ground, going at a normal speed. There's no match down on the ground. There's no fire sitting still.

Still, I hold onto the tiny ember of joy the memory brings me. My dad used to walk me through the rows on his shoulders. He was a tall man. So I got a bird's eye view of the red and purple of the berries set against the brown of the vines in the sea of green leaves.

"Good, you're here." My sister Marechal comes up to my parked car.

I can't remember parking. I barely remember the drive here. I get out and allow her to hug me, wishing I could feel her warmth.

Mare is always warm. When she let me sleep in her bed as a little girl, I would always kick off the covers and snuggle into her side. We haven't slept in the same bed for over ten years.

Mare is ten years older than me. I was one of those surprise babies, had later in life when my mother was in her forties. Another impossible feat I'd come through.

Mare looks me up and down. She wears a tailored business skirt showcasing her curves, a buttoned-up blouse more than hinting at her D cups, and Louboutins at her feet lengthening her already long legs. She would look like a hot librarian, except for the lab coat over her ensemble. That white coat and the prescription glasses turn her into every nerd's fantasy of a sexy scientist.

After the hug, Mare doesn't let me go. She tilts my chin up and delivers a double-cheeked kiss. We are second-generation American, but you couldn't take the French out of our veins if you tried.

"Arneis and the lawyers are here," she says. "The sooner we get this done, the better. I've got a mountain of lab work. You ready?"

Mare takes my hand like we are a united front. Her expensive heels click on the floors as we head through the

house into our dad's old study. My flip-flops clack the marbled floors of my childhood home.

"I don't see why you guys even need me," I say.

"Papa left us equal shares in the vineyard."

I didn't deserve the share of the empire my father had built. Not when I was the reason it's all come crumbling down.

"Just let them know you want to keep the vineyard running," Mare says. "You want to keep it in the family. You know what this place meant to Papa. We can get it back to its glory again. Wait until you taste my new wine mix."

I always let Mare boss me around. I idolized her when I was a little girl. I wanted to do everything she did. Be everything she was. But I am not.

I suck at science. I have no head for numbers. And I screw up everything I touch, yet always seem to come out unscathed. Case in point, I'm responsible for my father's death, but neither of my siblings seems to blame me.

My father's old study looks the same as the last time I was in here, for the reading of the will. It's even filled with the same people. They asked me questions then, questions I was too scarred to answer. Now my time is up.

"Hey, *ma petite fille*." My big brother Arneis pulls me in for a hug. He does not bother with the two kisses. He's fully assimilated into American life. So much so that he's taken office in the local government.

Arneis pulls me aside, away from Mare and the lawyers. "I know you've had a rough time this year. But it's almost over. Say the word and you don't have to deal with any of this anymore. We can sell the vineyard and make a nice profit to set you up so you don't have to do anything for the rest of your life."

Arneis wants to sell the vineyard. Marechal wants to keep it going. Me? I don't care one way or the other. But it all comes down to my vote.

No matter what I decide, someone I love will get hurt and I will walk away without a scratch. Again.

Arneis takes a seat on one side of me and pats my knee. Mare sits on the other side and rubs my arm. The suits begin talking technical legalese that goes over my head. Because I am in over my head.

I'm walking on a tight rope between the last two pillars of my foundation. My balance is precarious. At any moment I'll fall off. Would there be anyone there to catch me? Perhaps a green-eyed man who makes me want to spill all of my secrets?

"Carignan? What's your decision?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*H*adrian

I WRAP my bare hands around a cherry tree. With a heave I uproot it. With my nails, I cut the tree's top above the last branch. My skin tears and chaffs. I don't ignore the pain. It's part of my process.

When the work of picking grapes became backbreaking for me as a young man, I moved on to become a cooper, the person who crafts the barrels that help give the wine its distinct flavor. It isn't just what grows on the vine that gives flavor. It's also how the wood is chosen, how it is fired, and molded into shape to hold the wine.

Oak was the tried and true wood for barrels. But I wanted to try cherry bark here in Patagonia. I also experimented with hickory, maplewood, chestnut, and walnut. I heard of Japanese winemakers using cedar for a minty taste. That was a step too far.

I love pounding the wood, the smell of the bark toasting over the fire. It is a lost art. I have heard tell some winemakers put their wine into cardboard boxes to serve. Where is the Inquisition when you need it?

Using the edge of my hand like a blade, I split the wood into quarters that will become the staves that will create the shape of the barrel. I dig my fingers into the wood, shaping the staves into the curved dimensions I want. With that done, I put the pieces into the cellar to dry. There they'll stay for three years so that the wood is waterproof. Winemaking is a long game. The three of us have nothing but time.

The machines are all clean, meaning Viri is done for the night. He is a cellar rat. He does all the grunt work below the ground that transforms the grapes into liquid ambrosia. Like me, he prefers to work in solitude. Life has not been kind to either of us in the love department.

I walk past the ancient torture devices which have been shoved into the corner. But as I walk by I get a vision of a body being stretched over the rack. Dark nipples straining as her back bends. Honey-wine eyes wide as the pleasure wracks through her body.

I bring my thumb to my mouth for the tenth time tonight. Her taste is long gone, but the memory lingers. No, that's not true. My thoughts of her replace my first taste of honey or cherries. She becomes the new litmus test by which I will judge a dessert.

"You thinking of her?"

I look up to find Gaius. He's out of the denim work clothes he wears when he works with the grapes. He stands before me in slacks and an expensive shirt.

Am I that transparent? I wasn't aware he saw Carignan earlier the other evening. Perhaps those shifters Frangelico sent over woke him. Or perhaps Frangelico told Gaius about the favor I asked of him.

"It's been two hundred years, Hadrian."

Oh. He isn't talking about the human. He's talking about Domitia, my one true love.

"I've tried to hold my tongue for the last two centuries, but I think it's time you move on."

"Move on?" I turn the words over in my mouth. They don't taste as bitter as they should.

"I know you believe she was the love of your life..."

The way he rolls his eyes and sighs at the end of his sentence belies his assertion.

"But your relationship with Domitia was tumultuous on its best days. Turbulent on the normal days. Homicidal on the worst days."

I would be the first to admit Domitia and I had our ups and downs. But that is how passion works. Love is a raging storm, not a calm sea.

"I know we've never talked about this." Gaius comes up to me and puts his hand on my shoulder. "Men didn't talk about things like this in our time. Hell, they don't talk about these things today."

"What things?"

"You are an abuse survivor."

I knock his hand off my shoulder. That is just too far. "She and I both enjoyed it rough. You of all people should know that."

Despite what the religious books might say, monogamy wasn't as prized a relationship status in ancient times. Domitia certainly didn't believe in the practice. She had many lovers, including Gaius and Viri and an army of others. Literally. She once boarded a warship for the Spanish Armada and offered herself up to any sailor who was willing.

Me? I suppose I was ahead of my time. I was faithful from the beginning to the end.

"A good flogging," says Gaius, "sure. A bit of choking and breath play, fine. But staking you?"

"That was one time."

Gaius raises a brow.

"Fine," I admit. "Twice."

Domitia had partially staked me a couple of times during arguments. But she had never twisted the stake or sent it

all the way through to actually kill me. She was a passionate woman given to fits of jealousy. Even though I'd never given her cause to doubt my devotion.

She could sleep with an army. She could bed my friends. But she did not take well to me looking at another woman. Not that I ever did. I am devoted to this day.

The image of Carignan comes into my mind. Her eyes that sparkle like a glass of fine wine. Her smile that has no bite. Her worry that she caused me pain.

"She was your first and only," Gaius is saying. "She shouldn't be your last. You should know what a normal relationship feels like."

"Says the man who's had a different woman in his bed every night for five centuries."

"Blasphemy," Gaius spits. "I don't sleep in a bed."

I try not to crack a smile. But he knows me too well. He chuckles first and I follow suit.

It is a miracle that we are friends, brothers. I tried to kill him a few times after Domitia took him to bed. We were equally matched and always came away bloody and bruised. A few times he had me at his mercy, but he never delivered the kill strike with a stake to my heart. When I finally got the better of him, I found I couldn't pierce his chest. The bastard grew on me, and I came to see that he didn't love Domitia.

The relationship between a sire and their sireds is a tricky beast. Most sires are murdered by their children. Perhaps that's why Domitia only ever turned young men. We were all putty in her hands.

But still, "Abusive?" I say. "I wasn't some simpering flower, Gaius. I loved her."

His hooded gaze quirks, missing nothing.

"Love her." I quickly correct my tense.

"You had it right the first time, brother. It's all in the past. She's gone. You should let her go."

That is exactly the problem. That's what I did. We had a fight, the worst we'd had in decades. I was prepared to walk away. But not forever.

I'd let her go that night. By daybreak, she was nothing but ash. All because of another jealous fit.

"She stepped out into the sun," says Gaius. "We'll never know why."

No, that wasn't true either. I did know why. I knew, but I didn't reach her in time.

"All I'm saying is she fucked you in the head," says Gaius. "You might as well actually get fucked. Come out with me tonight."

My dick stirs at the thought of fucking. But not some nameless sub at Club Toxic. I don't want to go out. I want to stay home and look at the sky. Maybe prowl around the vineyards within the vicinity waiting for something to fall from the sky.

"Not tonight," I say. "I have work to do, a phone call to make."

"I tried." Gaius throws up his hands. But he embraces me in a one-armed hug.

I return the gesture. He is the reason I made it out of the darkness of the Middle Ages.

I wait until I hear the engine of his car roar to life before I lift the phone. Only to put it back down a second later as Viri walks by.

The male is in faded jeans and ruffled tunic. There was a B-negative blood bag in one hand. A whiskey bottle in the other.

He nods at me. It is the only acknowledgment he'll give me for the rest of the night. He is a true lost cause. Maybe I want to be found.

I dial. I don't waste time on pleasantries when the other end is picked up. "Was the package delivered safely the other day?"

"We took her home."

Well, that was that. I had no reason to check on her. There was always the awkwardness of having to be invited inside a human's home.

"But she did ask us for a favor."

"What favor?"

"She said she wanted to plank walk. So we helped her arrange something."

Fuck. So she wasn't done toying with her own life. Well, if Carignan was going to be careless with it he'd just have to take charge of it himself.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

E *ari*

I LEARNED there is an actual plank walk. Not the one Hadrian was talking about. That one happened in New York with a Frenchman known as Philippe Petit. I think Hollywood made a movie about it.

The actual plank walk is in China. It's known as the world's most dangerous hiking trail; Mount Huashan. The Road in the Sky.

I saw pictures of it during my Googling after my comedic escort home. I couldn't get to sleep after my skydiving adventure earlier in the day. I was far too keyed up. I'm not used to having that much energy and I had no idea what to do with all that vitality.

Well, that's not true. I knew what I wanted to do with it. But the man I wanted to do something with it about hadn't contacted me. His contact info wasn't listed in the phone book, or anywhere on the internet. And the three stooges wouldn't give it to me, no matter how much I offered them. But they did say they could do something about the plank walk.

So, while I waited, I fired up my laptop. Instead of searching out porn sites and looking for scenes containing dark-haired men with green eyes tying up girls, I searched for the term Hadrian had mentioned to me.

The Mount Huashan Road in the Sky is a series of ancient paths chiseled into the mountainside. The planks are suspended on cliffs with crisscrossing wooden planks only inches wide with narrow footholds and steep stairs made of stone. All that is there for security are rusty chains bolted into the mountainside as handholds.

Or at least that's how it used to be. From the pictures I saw from my search, there are cable cars and harnesses at the site now. It's been transformed for the safety of tourists who wanted life-altering excursions, but not a life-ending experience. I struck it from my bucket list.

Seat belts are a suggestion in my life.

"You sure about this?" Tate's fingers tap a nervous rhythm on the brick wall. Most of his nails are jagged lines, gnawed down to the nub. He chews at his cuticles now.

I look out before me and my heart kicks up a beat. It's not a mountain that I'm about to traverse. But the two structures below me are high in the sky.

There is construction underway at the old Patagonia Savings and Trust building and the Robles High Rise. These two towering structures are only 1300 feet in the air. Not exactly the Twin Towers that Philippe Petit walked between the roofs of. But those buildings aren't an option any longer.

There is a wide plank that is now stretched between the two roofs. The two buildings are also closer together than the New York towers were. The plank stretches less than a quarter-mile. Not impossible, but still dangerous enough to get the blood pumping in my veins.

The stooges worked fast to get the plank laid. I'd paid them a ransom's worth to do it. There is a harness there

that they insisted on. I wear it. But only because I like the feel of the bindings crisscrossing my body.

"You can go back down if you want," I say to Tate.

"No, no," he says, spitting out the bit of flesh he's torn from his thumb's nail bed. "I told you, danger gives me a boner."

I turn to him, looking at him as though I'm seeing him for the first time. He looks like he's aged since this morning. He's just a few years older than me, twenty-five I think he told me. But he looks at least ten years older than that. His hair is thinning. There are wrinkles all around his eyes and mouth. He looks like he is in a mid-life crisis trying to recapture his youth.

He tugs a vial from his pocket. Inside is the white powder that is stealing his youth. "Want a hit?"

"Nah," I say, turning down the coke. "I'm good."

I never want anything interrupting the natural high. If I am impaired, I might miss the sensations. I want to wake up my feelings, not deaden them.

I tune out Tate's snort and focus on what I'm about to do. There is a hum of anticipation in my body. Probably what Tate feels every time he goes to his dealer to score.

I inhale and smell the fresh, clean scent of night air. The breeze kicks up and my stomach flutters, my gut knows it's about to get fed. The moon shines on my face, a spotlight as I take my place on the wooden stage that is a twelve-inch wide plank secured between two rooftops.

When I pull the straps of my harness tight, I get a tingle all over my skin. When I lock myself into the apparatus, my heart starts to pound. When I step onto the plank, I go breathless.

The wind lifts the tiny hairs on the nape of my neck. The air up here is thinner. Not as cold and thin as standing in the open door of a plane ready to jump. But similar enough. My nerves wake up.

It isn't as warm as my head against his chest. It isn't as sizzling as his fingertips on my lips. The hold of the harness isn't as tight as being in his arms. The light of the moon doesn't ignite me like his breath on my forehead did.

Why am I up here and not on Hadrian's doorstep?

Because he knows who I am. He knows where I live. He could've come to me anytime today. He could've called to check and see if I was okay. He didn't even drive me home himself. He clearly isn't interested. But, oh man, am I.

Just thinking about Hadrian makes me feel alive, hot, wet.

I take another step on the plank. Right foot. Then left foot. My steps are slow but sure.

There's something out there in the darkness. Something on the other side that is calling to me. It's making promises of heat, pledges of delight, vows of bliss.

Hadrian?

No. It can't be him. It's my mind playing tricks on me. But, hell, deal me in on this game.

My feet move on their own accord. Behind me, I hear cheering. I ignore Tate. He's likely too high to even understand what's going on. I want to get away from him and closer to that dark temptation. I feel certain Hadrian is on the other side.

I am not thinking of my dad any longer. It's Hadrian I want to turn to. Hadrian's words I want to hear. Hadrian's touch I want to feel.

There is a flash from above. Something whizzes by my left ear. It is too large to be a bug or a bird.

When I turn to look, I lose my footing. I don't have one of those balancing sticks like Philippe the Frenchman. But I am attached to a safety harness. With the help of the straps, I gain my balance back.

I turn and look over my shoulder. I haven't gone that far. Should I turn back?

No. I am determined to go across. Or even stay put. Any way that I can to keep the sensations coursing through my blood.

My ears perk as someone calls my name. It isn't my dad's voice I hear. The words are intelligible.

There is another flash. This time on my right side. A gust of wind hits me in the chest. Both my feet come off the plank. I am suspended in the air by the safety harness.

The harness yanks, jerking me in its safety straps. There is a moment of silence. Tate's shouts fill the air, but I ignore him. There is nothing he can do.

It's the parachute all over again. Only this time, I do not want to fall. I am dangling by a thread.

Looking down I can see the street. The asphalt is as black as night, not the green gradation of a vineyard. The path is clear. There is no tall man standing below to catch me.

I sway in the air. My body moves like a pendulum swinging between life and death.

I reach up trying to grab the straps. Then my ears fill with the most horrific sound. The sound of the strap ripping.

I am falling.

Tate's screams died moments ago. He is no longer on the rooftop. He's likely fled the scene. Man, do I know how to pick my friends.

The wind is all I hear as I fall fast. The blood rushes inside me from my brain to my heart. From my heart to my toes.

I have no chute to save me. Nothing in reserve. For the second time in forty-eight hours, I am falling to certain death.

And then there are arms around me. I am being pulled out of thin air. I blink my eyes open and he is there.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*H*adrian

I RUN ALL the way here. For the first time in my second life, I am out of breath. The scarce amount of blood running through my veins boils. It goes straight to my head.

I smell her before I see her. Her scent is that of an overripe berry in the wind. She is all around me, swirling over my head, wafting into my nostrils. I look up and my stomach drops.

When I see her walking in the sky, I want to roar. When she slips on the thin beam, I do.

As fast as I am, I will never make it to her in time. She dangles on nothing but a bit of twine. If it were my handiwork and I had suspended her, I know that the binds would hold.

Praise the Fates, the harness she's in does hold.

Those stooges will have a slower death for providing the safety mechanism that buys her time. But I am still going to rake them over hot coals for suggesting the idea to her. Though I suppose I'm the one who suggested it.

The fact of the matter is that they facilitated it.

The reality of the situation is that she did it.

So she is the one who I will focus my punishments on.

Yes, that is my plan. As soon as I get my hands on her, I'll turn her ass red. I'll make her pussy weep. I'll make her lips quiver as she begs for my mercy. And I will show her none.

She wants danger? She wants to feel. Oh, she's about to feel something, all right.

As I plan which of my instruments to dust off from my old collection, the harness that holds her safety snaps. She is falling again. Falling fast. Too fast this time.

She doesn't fall straight. The wind pushes her dangerously close to the brick of the building. If she impacts it, her flesh will rip, her bones will break.

There is no parachute floating over her to break her fall. If she lands in my arms at that increased speed something in her fragile body will fracture. I cannot have that. Not before I have the chance to break her body, her mind, her will into submission.

I blur, faster than any vampire has ever moved. Dust mites become visible. The cricket's sharp notes elongate. Hydrogen molecules collide to form air.

I scale the building, digging my nails into the brick and grabbing footholds until I am to her. Just in time is an understatement. I grab her body to me and throw us, my back first, into a window.

Shards shatter and clatter down onto the cold, hard floor. The sharp points pierce my skin and instantly heal. The only blood I smell is my own... for now.

I have her. She is cradled on my chest as I lie on a bed of glass. I hold her for long moments. Just listening to the sound of her ragged breath.

When her breathing slows to match mine, I rise. She is still cradled in my arms. There is no way I'm putting her down. I move to a corner of the office space away from the glass.

Her eyes open slowly. She looks at me, her eyes filling with wonder, disbelief, and then tears.

"Do you have a death wish?" I bellow.

Her lips part. "What?" She gulps, trying to take in more air. "No. I-"

"You nearly died. If I had been one second later you would've met the sun."

Her head shakes, eyes opening and closing as though she's trying to focus in the dark room. "The sun? What are you talking about?"

"Of all the idiotic, ill-conceived, monumentally stupid things to do."

Her face contorts. Pain and hurt are etchings in the grooves around her eyes. "Let me go."

"No."

I know I hurt her feelings with the name calling. Better I hurt her feelings than the street break her back. She struggles to move, but she cannot. Once again, she is bound in a harness and served up on a platter to a practiced sadist.

"You've shown me you can't be in charge of your own life." I latch my hands around the harness straps and tug her chest to me. Her lips are only an inch away from mine.

"Where in the hell do you get off?" she shouts.

There is fire in her cinnamon-colored eyes. The heat of them wakes up something deep inside. I can smell the blood pumping through her. She is angry and her essence will be spicy.

"I saved your life," I say. My bottom lip brushes her mouth as I speak. "Not once but twice. It's mine now."

"What?"

Carignan's gaze is wide and aroused. Her blood is nearing the right temperature for me to gulp her down. I plan to take a healthy gulp of her. Soon.

"I'm coming to collect," I say.

I let go of the strap. Her body tumbles back. I catch her head before it can hit the ground. Then I am over her.

"What are you ahhh-" She gasps. Sucking in air through her wide-open mouth. A keening sound comes from somewhere deep in her chest as I pull the strap of the harness, the one that touches her right thigh.

With my nail, I rip through the tough fabric of the strap. Keeping the pressure, I move the edge of the strap along her inner thigh until it runs right up against her right labia. The fabric of her jumper is no hindrance. I could make out the outline of her pussy with my eyes closed. All I'd need is my nose to know the parameters of her desire.

"You say you don't want to die?" I ask.

"No," she whimpers. "I don't. I just want to feel."

"To feel what?" Inching the edge of the strap in the space between the crease of her inner thigh and her pussy, I press inward.

Carignan takes a deep breath before she is able to speak. "Like this. The way I feel when I'm with you."

The room is dark. A sliver of moonlight casts a small ray of illumination. But I see her perfectly. When her wine-colored eyes latch onto mine, I know she can see me too.

Taking the other half of the cut strap, I knot the two pieces back together. Her right leg is now splayed wide. The edge of the strap I've wedged between her thigh and pussy digs into that space. Not touching where I know she needs it to, it's a constant tease of a release only I can give her.

She whimpers again and reaches her hand to me. I catch her wrists in one of my hands. Breaking off another bit of loose rope, I twine her hands together and stretch her arms over her head. I tie that end of the rope to the desk's leg.

She is stretched out for me. Arms pulled tight. One leg splayed open for me. Time to get to work.

I snap the strap holding her left thigh. Her leg trembles in its freedom. Using the edge of the strap, I press it flat

over her core.

Carignan bucks off the ground. But she can only lift her hips, and only an inch or two off the ground. She is almost entirely at my mercy.

There will be no relief unless I give it. There will be no escape unless I offer it. And I am not feeling charitable.

"Hadrian," she whispers in the dark.

I barely hear her. My gaze is trained on the nectar between her legs. I've only rubbed the strap once and she has soaked the fabric of her clothing. She is so wet that the imprint of her labia is clear.

I press deeper. Turning the rope to the sharp edge so that her core is divided in half. I do this lightly. She strains towards the ropes, towards me.

"Do the ropes get you off?" I ask.

"Yes," she moans. "Yes, please."

I'm so used to my victims taking time before they beg. Not Carignan. I don't even need to ask her to beg. She does it so readily, so prettily.

"Do you want more?" I ask.

"Please," she begs. "I want more. Please."

She is not the only one who is wet. My mouth is so filled with desire that I can't swallow it down fast enough. My fangs are dripping with a need I haven't had in centuries.

I wipe the top of the strap over her clit. Back and forth like a windshield wiper would. Like my tongue soon will.

Her hips chase the motion. She is unpracticed. Has no man ever taken his pleasure from that bud? No man but me ever will.

No man but me will ever see her like this. Hands bound and stretched. Thighs spread. Hips trembling. What I wouldn't give for a flogger to watch her body jerk and jump.

I know her nipples must be tight pebbles. Her eyes flutter closed. Her mewled words become unintelligible.

I have her total surrender. If she were in confession, she would tell me everything, give me anything. All I want is her

release.

Her body's natural pleasure-seeking brain has taken over. I know this because her hips move in tight circles. Her chest heaves in short pants. Her eyes blast open as her orgasm takes her.

Her fingers twitch. Her eyelashes flutter. Her belly quakes. All while she screams.

It's then that I can take no more of the torture that I am inflicting. I pull the strap taut over her quivering pussy, and I take her lips. My kiss is as brutal as her orgasm. It's a jerking, rocking, biting thing.

One fang sinks into her plump lip. A bead of her sweet blood seeps out. They say it only takes one hit of heroin to become hooked.

It takes one drop of Carignan, and I am addicted.

She is still bound as she comes down from her orgasm and I return to my senses. But the ropes mean nothing. She is mine. And I am keeping her.

I snap the remaining ropes of the harness with my nail, tearing the frayed edges into a sharp edge. She is quiet, docile, sated. I feel like I just awoke from a long slumber.

I glance down and that's when I notice it. The edge of the strap that is attached to her harness, half of it is frayed. The other half is a perfect edge. As though it has been cut with a straight edge.

The taste of her blood on my tongue goes bitter. Her fall was no accident. Someone cut the harness.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*E*ari

I'VE DIDDLED my pleasure bump before like any curious girl who wanted to understand her body. There have been a few tingles, a pleasant rush, even some thigh squeezing as tiny ripples of pleasure tickled my toes. But there has never been waves wracking over my body, pulling me under so that I can't breathe. I have never been pulled under, water going over my head, my body convulsing as pleasure breaks over my entire being.

My throat is hoarse from begging Hadrian. Begging him to stop. Begging him to not stop. Begging complete gibberish as my brain turned to mush and my body turned on me.

Once the tremors stop and the world rights itself, I am sure all my fingernails are cracked and broken from clenching them into my palms. I can't feel my pinkie toes because they are so curled. My knees are knocking together now that they are no longer bound. I'll definitely need to call a chiropractor because I'm certain I've thrown my back out.

I stretch my limbs. Though I'm no longer bound, I'm not able to get very far. The harness and ropes are gone. I am in someone's arms. I know it's Hadrian's arms because of the warmth and the feeling of utter safety.

I open my eyes and see the honey gold of his chest. I inhale and the spicy scent of him tickles my nose. I splay my hand over his chest.

Surprisingly my palms are dry of blood. My nails are intact, mostly. I flex my feet and straighten my back. Looking down I see the nail on my right middle finger has bent, but it's hanging on.

There is a warm hum still buzzing through me. Not the strong current of the orgasm. I can still feel, and I feel alive. I am alive. Hadrian has saved me. Again.

We are walking. Not in the building in downtown. We are outside in the moonlight. The scent of saplings fills the air. We're in a vineyard.

How did we get here? Did he drive? I don't remember getting into a car. I don't see a car. Did I sleep the entire way? I guess it's possible. I must've blacked out after the orgasm.

"Hey?" I say.

Hadrian lowers his gaze and regards me. A sliver of moonlight curls around his cheek. "Hey."

I feel each of his ten fingers on me. I know their exact locations. Ten pressure points that are the only thing keeping me tethered to this plane of existence.

I've been running away for a year, diving into thin air, leaping into the unknown. For the first time that I can remember, I don't want to move. I just want to stay put. Forever.

"Are you still angry with me?" I ask.

Hadrian doesn't answer. His gaze roves my face. I feel each place his pupils land, like one of those heat sensors. Though it's my nipples as well as my cheeks and lips that are so hot right now.

"I'm not suicidal," I say, remembering his accusation.

"I believe that," he says. "You like the rush. It's clear to me now."

His gaze slips to my nipples. The twin points are completely wanton and they perk for him. His nostrils flare like he can tell.

"But you will not be doing any more adventures," he says. "Not without my leave."

"Your leave?" I ask.

"My permission," he clarifies.

A giggle escapes my lips. Then a laugh, followed by a very unladylike snort. My sister raised me a feminist. "Like, what? You're the boss of me now?"

His green eyes are as hard as jade. His lips thin into a cruel line. "That's exactly what it's like."

Something inside me rears up like he spoke a long-held truth.

"I've saved your life twice now," he continues. "You owe me two."

"I..."

I what? Wasn't this what I wanted? To be with Hadrian.

And he knew it. He knew it by the way I acted when he gave me that mind-blowing orgasm. It blew me away, so hard I blacked out.

"You're mine now."

That is crazy talk. I could've jumped out of his arms. His hold is loose. But I hold still.

A delicious heat washes over me from my fingertips down to my toes. It pulses in my core. A stronger pulse than my first skydive. Steeper than the first step onto the plank. Faster than my first time around the race track. I feel it is only the beginning.

"Yes," I admit.

"Ragazza brava."

My Italian is rough. But I think he just called me a good girl.

"What are you going to do with me?" I ask, still not struggling in his arms.

"I'm going to punish you."

"Punish me? Why?"

"Because you're mine and you nearly broke my possession."

There's a war raging inside me. Hot and cold. The heat flushes out of my pores with the fact that I am his. But my ardor is cooled by shame remembering my actions earlier this night.

"But didn't you already punish me?" I say. "Back in the building When you... you know?"

"You mean when I fucked you with the strap of your harness and made you come all over your panties?"

I swallow, but the lump stays in my throat. I nod but my head feels light and heavy at the same time.

"Say it." His voice is a hiss, like the devil tempting Eve with forbidden fruit.

I reach for the apple and bite. "Wasn't my punishment being fucked with my harness strap and coming in my panties?"

Saying it out loud doesn't sound like a punishment. It sounds like a gift. And I want another bite of the apple.

"No, *stellia*. I let you come. I'm not going to be so nice this time. I'm going to strip you bare. Tie you down. Bring you to the brink of orgasm over and over again. But never let you crest. Not until you learn your lesson."

I am panting. I am writhing. "My lesson?"

"That the only jump, the only leap, or dive you ever will want to take will be that peak into an orgasm that I bring you to."

He sets me on my feet. For the last ten minutes, he was the only thing in my sight. Now I see that we are in his bedroom. He steps behind me. The door is wide open in front of me. I could run.

I turn to him. His gaze is stern, like an avenging god.

"I'll be good," I say.

I see the pleasure spark in his gaze in real-time.

"But," I say, "There is one thing you should know. I'm a virgin."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*H*adrian

CARIGNAN'S DECLARATION doesn't rattle me. For all intents and purposes I, too, am a virgin now. I've been celibate for nearly two centuries. That's over two lifetimes.

But I don't tell her this. I take her by the hand and lead her to my bed.

Unlike Gaius, I actually sleep on the mattress and not hardwood. Being born poor and sleeping on straw for the majority of his life makes it a difficult habit to break. Gaius showcases his riches in his clothes. But when he closes his eyes, he is still the broken slave that he was born, the man who fought hard to win his freedom, only to lose it to a vampire seductress.

Gaius's daytime proclivities are not my concern right now. Carignan and her pleasure are. I sit her down atop my pillow top mattress, another of my favorite modern conveniences. Though my family wasn't poor, straw was the height of comfort in my youth. I'd burn the fodder before I let it come in contact with Carignan's soft flesh.

There's not much else in my bedroom other than the bed. There are clothes in the closet. A few odds and ends I've collected over the centuries are tucked in the closet as well. I'm not very sentimental. All I care for is either planted in the vineyard outside or down the hall preparing to turn in for a day's rest. Grapes and my blooded brothers. Everything else always turns to tatters and fades.

Carignan will fade someday, as well. I will never turn a living soul and condemn them to this existence. At some point, I will have to tell her what I am. She will grow older and watch me remain youthful.

And yes, I plan to keep her that long. Perhaps when she goes to ground I will finally step into the sun. But that is a ways off.

She is here now. Safe. Under my protection. Under my command.

I will find who slit her safety harness. That person I will torture and show no mercy. No one tampers with what is mine.

But first, my little daredevil needs to learn her lesson.

The torn harness is long removed from her skin. Only the jumpsuit and her footwear remain. I cup her calf to remove her boots one by one. The moonlight is at my back as I work. The windows of my private sanctuary are dressed with blackout curtains, my favorite convenience in the advancement of technology. Before I lose my head in the valley between her thighs, I press the button that casts us into complete darkness.

Because I want to look upon my new possession, I rise to light a fire in the hearth. Incandescent bulbs and fluorescent lights would destroy the mood.

Carignan waits for me on the bed. She shivers, but I know it's not from the cold. I take pleasure in making her wait. She knows what I can do to her body with just a strap of fabric. I know she's anticipating my cock.

I peel off the layers of her clothing to reveal sun-kissed flesh. So different from Domitia. She was paler than porcelain. Unlike the fine, ceramic material, Domitia was unbreakable. But she enjoyed having others take a crack at it.

Domitia and I fought for dominance in the bedroom, in life. Carignan gives me her total submission. She acquiesces as I peel the jumper from her breasts. She is pliant when I urge her to lift her hips to rid her body of the garment. She yields as I divest her of the remaining scraps of fabric that cover her intimate places. Perfectly obedient.

"I want you to kiss me," Carignan demands.

I lift an eyebrow as I tower over her. "You're in no position to make demands."

Her chin lowers, along with her eyes. "Please?"

I've never heard that word from Domitia. *Now. Again. Harder. Faster.* Yes, all of those were a regular utterance. But never please.

I capture Carignan's lips with my own. It's like tasting one of those sugar sweets that has a hidden center of something even sweeter. It takes everything in me not to bite down to get at the center of her Tootsie Pop.

I lick at the fleshy part of her lips. I suck at the underside of her tongue. And then I crack. I nick the space at the center of her upper lip.

The essence of Carignan is pure saccharine. Richer than honey. Denser than the darkest chocolate. The shock of the sweetness goes to my head.

I rear back.

My fangs elongate, dripping with need.

Carignan's eyes are shut. Her neck is exposed. I realize then that she has complete trust and faith in me.

I swallow. My fangs retract. For now.

Wrapping my hands around her hips, I lift her and toss her body back towards the headboard. She startles and flails.

Good. She needs that jolt to wake up. To be alert. There is a monster in the bed.

"Hands," I growl.

It takes her a second, but she offers me her hands. I take the edge of the expensive sheet and I tear. With the strip of fabric, I bind her wrists. The loops of the sheets make the sign of the cross as I fasten her hands together. There is no savior in this room tonight.

Her gaze goes wide. Her breathing goes shallow. Her tongue darts out and she licks her lower lip.

The sound of fabric ripping again snaps her back to attention. She bites down on her lip as I bind her breasts. Again, I make the sign of the cross, making sure to leave her nipples exposed for my torture.

Carignan offers not a single whimper of protest. She holds still as I strap her body down and manacle her hands to the headboard of my bed. I sit back on my haunches to admire my handiwork. I only look for a second before I am on her.

Her lower body arches off the bed when my tongue attacks her left breast. I lick and suckle. She writhes and shivers. By the Fates, she might be one of the rare birds who can come from nipple stimulation only. But we will test that theory later.

I slap the edge of the bind across her breast and she snaps out of the trance. Her lips pout like a child whose toy has been taken away. She is not getting the point of all this.

"Please, Hadrian. Tell me what you want."

"Sei una ragazza brava."

I tear another strip of the sheets. Stretching down the length of her body, I bend her leg at the knee. The knot I tie here is tight. It leaves her core exposed to me, as it always should be. I can't wait to hogtie her, but that will be for another night.

"Please, Hadrian. I need you inside me."

"Sei una ragazza brava."

After tying her other thigh so that she is both exposed and immobile, I come down slowly to my belly. I simply gaze at her weeping pussy. Those tears are all for me. No sharing. Just mine.

I take my first taste.

Carignan can't move. She can only feel. That's what she said she wanted. That's exactly what I'm giving her.

I lift her ass in my hands and bring her to my mouth. I taste each of her folds singly. Fuck if she's not sweeter than a mango. I swirl my tongue over her pink flesh, tugging her labia with my lips all the way to the edge. At the edge of her intimate skin, I break the skin.

Sweet blood and cunt juice. Fuck me. I meant to torture her with pleasure. But the pain of not having my dick buried deep inside of her is becoming too much to bear.

Her whimpered pleas weaken my will. The taste of her on my tongue clouds my resolve. The feel of her, alive and trembling in my hands, makes me forget my purpose.

I know where she wants me. Her pussy pulses with need, leaking more tears. I slap her inner thigh, to bring us both back down. Carignan screams her frustration. Now she's getting it.

"Sei una ragazza brava."

My dick is weeping now. I give her another knick on her right labia, taking in another sip of her blood. Her punishment is nearing an end because I can't last much longer. My hips buck into the mattress as I suck her clit. Her bud is overripe, begging to be plucked.

"I am," she whispers. "I am being a good girl."

Thank the Fates she figures it out. Too bad I can't answer. My mouth is full.

Her hips rock only slightly in the binds, but her pussy clenches hard around my tongue as her inner muscles convulse. As I spill into the sheets, I lose all semblance of control. My fangs sharpen and I sink my teeth into the crease of her thigh.

I swallow her down into my throat, into my heart, into my soul.

She is a part of me now.

She is mine.

But the real lesson that we learned this night, is that I am hers.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*E*ari

I AM AN EARLY BIRD. Have been my whole life. But my eyes simply refuse to open to the new day.

I have a lot of false starts. Waking and dozing. Something demands that I rest, that I stay put.

It is no hardship. My body feels heavy from pleasure. Oh, the pleasure I experienced before falling to sleep. Part of me wonders if it was a dream. But I know it was real.

There is an ache between my thighs from being forced to stay open. There's also an irritation down there, right at the crease of my thigh. I supposed the binds Hadrian used chafed there.

But I'm not bound any longer. I am free. My fingers and toes are still curled from clenching hard. And long. And repeatedly. I didn't know multiple orgasms were a thing. I thought that most women don't even experience orgasm their first time.

Wait? Was that actually my first time? Hadrian didn't penetrate me with his penis. So, technically I am still a virgin.

A very satisfied virgin. A very satisfied virgin who does not want to get out of bed. But I want to see what this new day with Hadrian has in store for me.

My thighs aren't open any longer. I can press them together. But when I do, the space between my thighs, my intimate lips feel swollen. I'd rather keep my legs apart.

My knees are no longer bent so I stretch them to the edge of the bed. I stretch my arms out too. Reaching my limbs down and out to the sides of the bed I realize I have the entire queen bed to myself. I am alone.

Hadrian cut me loose from the binds. And he left me. My eyes have no problem springing open with that devastating realization.

And there he is.

He sits by the bed in a tall backed chair. His chin rests on one hand. His thumb rubs his bottom lip. His gaze is intent on me, watching me.

"There you are," I say.

"Where else would I be?"

He doesn't move to gather me to him. Or kiss me. Or return to the bed. He simply looks at me.

I am covered, but naked beneath the sheets. Somehow I feel the sheets are no barrier for him. He sees all of me. He always has. Even from that first night... way back two days ago.

"You always show up exactly when I need you," I say.

He tugs at his bottom lip. Pressing the plump flesh between thumb and forefinger. I note that there is a tattoo on his bare chest. It looks familiar, like something I'd seen in a history book at school. A crest with a cross in the center. A sword on one side and a tree branch on the other.

I fidget with the edge of the bedclothes, staring at his chest instead of meeting his gaze. "Why is that?"

"Fate," he says.

I shift in the bed. I don't want to get into a discussion of God and how He's let me down. No. That wasn't why I

asked Hadrian that particular question. That wasn't what I wanted to know.

"How?" I ask. "How is it that you're always there exactly when I need you?"

I sit up. The sheet falls away exposing my breasts. Hadrian's gaze latches on to my girls. My nipples greet him with a full-pebbled salute.

I pull the sheet up. Not out of embarrassment. He's seen me from angles I haven't seen myself. I just want his full attention to answer my question.

Hadrian's gaze lifts from the sheet to my eyes. And holds. And holds.

After a second too long, I get the message. I let the sheet drop as per his silent command. Then I move the sheet from my torso as well, giving Hadrian a view of all of me. All that he owns.

He said it last night. But this morning I come face to face with the truth of it. I am completely owned by this man; body and soul. And my heart is fast catching up in the transfer of goods.

"Ragazza brava."

Hadrian rises from the chair and looms over me. I'm certain he doesn't stand over me to prove his dominance when he sinks to his knees. With the barest of nudges, he parts my thighs and puts himself between them.

"The answer to your question, *stellia*, is very simple. But you are not ready to hear it. I will tell you when you are."

I don't question him. I trust him. He opens his palm and I give him my hand, just as I'd done with my life.

Hadrian kisses my knuckles. Then my fingertips. The numbness of the past year has been gone since yesterday. It was like I was alive again.

"I want to talk to you about something else." He pulls my body onto his, cradling me against his chest. "Would anyone have any reason to harm you?"

I nuzzle into his chest. "Harm me?"

"Do you have any enemies?"

I rest my hand on his heart. "Enemies?"

No, I'm not really listening. I'm fascinated by the warmth of him, the smell of him, the feel of him.

Hadrian puts his forefinger under my chin and lifts my head. I obey, giving him my undivided attention. He lifts a brow, clearly not appreciating my parroting. I think back over what he's said to me.

Harm me? Enemies?

"I'm sorry," I say. "But the question is just ridiculous."

The idea is laughable. So I do. I laugh.

Hadrian does not laugh. He looks very serious.

"I don't have any enemies," I say. "Why are you asking me this?"

He reaches to the nightstand. I don't see what he has until he holds up a strap. At first, I think he's ready to tie me up again. My entire body coils in anticipation. But it's a harness strap, not a rope or a torn bedsheet.

"This was cut," he says, running his finger over the top of the thick fabric.

I look closer. It's the harness strap I'd worn last night on the plank walk. "This is from when you saved me? When you cut me loose."

"No. This happened before. Someone cut it before you stepped on the plank. And then it tore. What happened was no accident. I'm starting to wonder if the first fall was also an attempt."

"An attempt? An attempt at what?"

His gaze latches onto mine and holds. I know his answer. But it's ridiculous.

"Carignan, is there anyone that would benefit from your death?"

My lips set to say no. But something stops them. I look into his clear green eyes and I wrack my brain for the answer he seeks.

"My brother and sister. Marechal needs me to agree to keep the vineyard open. But Arneis wants me to agree to sell. I'm the deciding vote. They're waiting on me to make up my mind."

The words tumble out of me without stopping. I shudder at the force with which they are wrenched from a dark place inside me. Hadrian gathers me to him. His heat ushers away the cold, dark feeling.

"I'm sorry," he breathes into my hair. "I needed to know."

I push him away. I'm not sure why, but I feel violated. "My siblings would never do anything to hurt me. No one's trying to kill me. Those were accidents. What I was doing was dangerous, not a walk in the park."

"Okay," he soothes, bringing me back to him.

I come back into his arms without protest. I don't think I could ever deny this man anything.

"Okay, *stellia*. They were accidents. Accidents that will never happen again. I've got you."

He folds me in his arms and I let him. We stay like that for long moments. The room is dark. The fire has died down to embers.

"I should probably head home," I say. "What time is it?"

"Six o'clock."

"In the morning?"

"At night."

I jerk out of his hold, looking around for a timepiece. "I slept the entire day?"

"I was thorough with your lesson," he says, prowling toward me. "And I'm not done with you."

"I... my brother and sister, they'll be worried. I'm supposed to have dinner with them tonight. In an hour."

Hadrian's jaw turns to stone. I think he's about to forbid me to go. Yeah, that is definite disapproval on his brow. I know it well from the way my siblings look at me after each adventure.

Before Hadrian opens his mouth, something shifts in his features. "Fine," he says. "But I'm taking you."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

*H*adrian

I SENSE Carignan's reluctance at the command in my voice when I tell her I'll be coming to dinner with her. I do not temper my tone. I do not ask for an invitation to the family dinner.

I do realize that dinner with the family after only two days of knowing each other is fast. I don't care. This was a full-blown relationship the moment she fell into my arms. Her safety is my highest priority. She said so herself that her siblings had reason to harm her. I will cut their ties to her if I scent a whiff of ill will coming off of either of them.

"I need to go home and get dressed." She grabs her destroyed jumper from the other night.

"There are clothes for you here," I say as I walk through a door to an adjoining closet.

Carignan follows. Her feet are bare. A sheet is wrapped around her naked form. I do not bother with clothing for myself. I'd much prefer to keep her nude and in the bed. But I can make time for this little outing.

She gasps as I open the closet doors to reveal a full woman's wardrobe. There is a department store hanging on the dressers and inside the drawers.

"You dress a lot of women the morning after?" she asks.

"These were all purchased specifically for you."

"For me? When?"

"While you slept. I had them ordered and brought in."

I put in a call to the three shifters just before the sun came up. I never had any intention of taking her to her home. I have no intention of letting her out of my sight again. Until I reveal who and what I truly am, keeping her asleep through the day will be difficult. But not so much.

She is highly susceptible to my wishes. Each time she woke in the day, I only needed to nudge her mind to send her back to sleep.

"Pretentious," she says as she fingers the sundresses.

I smile, eager to have her model each one for me. But not as much as I want to decorate her skin with twine and bind her to the mattress.

"I guess you do this a lot?" she says after selecting a deep purple dress that brings out the cinnamon color in her eyes. "Seduce a woman to your bed and have everything she needs the next day. Cute trick."

Her head disappears inside the dress as she pulls it over her head. When her face pops out I am the first thing she sees. She swallows at the displeasure on my face.

"There's never been another woman in that bed," I say.

Her lips part. Her fingers fumble on the ties of the dress. I take over while I watch her features shift and contort, trying to figure out the puzzle of my words.

"Well, you haven't been here very long," she says.

"No. But I intend to stay for a very long time." I pull the last tie tight, gathering her to my chest. "And I plan to keep you with me."

Her features relax, no longer shifting to decipher my meaning. My words are pretty clear. I think she's finally

getting the picture.

“Man, you slept late. I’ve been waiting for you — oh!”

We both turn at the unwelcome interruption of Gaius’ voice. He is lucky she is dressed. Otherwise, I’d have to gouge my best friend’s eyes out.

Gaius stands in the doorway and simply stares. His lips move and nothing comes out. The male is never at a loss for words.

“Carignan, this is my brother Gaius. Gaius, this is my... Carignan.”

“Yours?” asks Gaius. “So soon? But I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. You fell hard for-”

I clear my throat. If Carignan weren’t pressed against me I’d flash my fangs and tear into my brother’s throat. Luckily, Gaius gets the hint and recovers.

“*Enchante, mademoiselle.*” He takes Carignan’s hand and bows over it like the courtly noble he pretends to be.

“*Tout le plaisir est pour moi, monsieur,*” she says in perfect French.

“Carignan’s family owns Durand,” I offer, mostly to keep that baby talk language off her tongue. While they chat, I take the moment to slip on clothing of my own.

“I’ve sampled the white wine,” says Gaius. “It’s very good.”

He’s lying. He hates white wine. I don’t bother to call him on it. I’m too busy wincing as Viri walks by the door in a kilt and cowboy boots.

He stops and stares at Carignan. From here I can see his fangs.

“Since when do we order take out?”

“She’s not here for dinner, Viri,” says Gaius.

“A prostitute then?”

“She’s Hadrian’s special friend.”

There isn’t much that scares vampires. We are the highest predators on the food chain. Even more deadly than lion shifters.

Viri's face goes ashen. A visible sweat breaks out on his forehead. He steps back from the doorway. His hand cups his privates. "Is she going to bind my dick in chains? I hated it when Domitia did that."

"Viri, manners," said Gaius.

Instead, Viri dashes out of the doorway and down the hall. His heavy footsteps boom as he makes a run for it. He was a favorite toy of Domitia's, but he did not appreciate her attention.

"Viri is not good with people," Gaius offers. "Carignan, would you mind if I borrow your Latin Lover to talk business for a moment?"

"We're headed out," I say, navigating myself and Carignan around Gaius. Grapes are the furthest thing from my mind.

"It's important," says Gaius. "We're experiencing a bit of root rot with the grapes. It's spreading along the vines. Nothing I'm doing works. Look."

Gaius holds up a sickly vine. There isn't much I can do. My father's vineyard never experienced root rot. Any vineyard in the Middle Ages that did was in danger of losing it all.

"I've seen that before," says Carignan. "My sister would know how to treat it. We're headed over there now."

My head jerks to Gaius. I glare at him. Like an annoying sibling, he ignores me and invites himself where he is not wanted.

"Wonderful," says Gaius. "I'll join you."

I place Carignan in the back seat. Gaius takes the passenger seat with the wilting vine in his lap. The drive is relatively short to the Durand vineyard.

Gaius and Carignan keep up a conversation over berries and vines and growing up on a vineyard. Something Gaius didn't do until he had a century under his belt. My thoughts are on the siblings.

Could one of them have cut that harness? I watched many blood relatives turn on one another during the Inquisition. I was only ever sure of the truly guilty party when I compelled them to talk. Often both had a bit of culpability.

Not my Carignan. She is guileless. I'd know even if I hadn't compelled her.

I do feel a modicum of guilt over that. I only did it to get the truth out of her. I would never do it to influence her feelings for me. Those I know are real.

I never had that before in my life. Domitia had initially compelled me to want her. But she hadn't had to push hard. After our first fuck, I was in love. I was also young. Very young.

Would I have felt the same had I had more experience? I don't know. It doesn't matter.

We arrive at the Durand estates. The house is a sprawling one story. We pull up around the back where the winery is.

Gaius beats me to the back to let Carignan out. He smirks as he takes her on his arm. He's playing with fire and he knows it. But he does not want Carignan. He never wanted Domitia. He just likes to get under my skin, the asshole.

The storefront of the winery is closed to the public this late in the evening. Carignan opens the door and steps across the threshold. Gaius and I halt in the entryway.

"Are you sure it's all right that we come inside?" I ask.

"Of course it's fine," says Cari. She doesn't glance back at us to see that we have stalled in the doorway.

"We don't want to disturb your sister's work," I hedge.

Carignan turns back. Her eyes narrow. Her head cocks to the side as she beholds the two of us standing in the doorway.

I hate that she is beyond my grasp. She can't see it, but my body is pressing against the seal of the entryway,

impatient to get back to her side.

"Don't be silly," she says finally. She raises her hand and waves us in. "Come on in. I want you to meet her."

I exhale as I step across the threshold. I am on her in a second. My hand is around her waist pulling her body back to mine. Behind me I hear Gaius chuckle as he falls into step with us.

We venture deep inside, to a laboratory. A woman dressed in a tight-fitting skirt beneath a lab coat is bent over a set of vials. Beside me, I see Gaius lick his fangs.

"Marechal?" Cari calls. But the woman doesn't lift her gaze. Cari tries again, louder this time. "Mare, I'm sorry I'm late."

Marechal looks up, startled. Her dark brown gaze is so like Carignan's. "Late? Oh. For dinner. I'm so sorry. I forgot. I'll just finish this up really quick." She pauses, finally noticing me and Gaius. "You brought guests?"

"That's Gaius Serrano and this is —."

"Oh, the Serranos. You purchased the old Palmezzo Vineyard. You should know that soil is prone to root rot."

"So we've learned." Gaius holds up the affected root.

"A classic case," says Mare. "I have just the cure."

"Mare," says Carignan. "Before you start the shop talk, I'd like you to meet Hadrian."

"And Hadrian is?" asks Mare.

"Hadrian is my..."

"I believe the proper term is boyfriend," I say.

Mare frowns at me. "Boyfriend?" She turns to Carignan. "Since when do you have a boyfriend?"

"Since... now," says Carignan.

Mare gives her full attention to me. Her shrewd gaze narrows as she looks at me over her glasses. "Your family label has been around for quite some time. You inherited the business?"

"I started working as soon as I could walk," I say.

“Me too,” she says. “I take my family business--all of it--seriously.”

“You seem a serious woman. The kind who’d do anything to protect your bottom line.”

Marechal squints over her glasses. It’s her gaze that latches onto mine. She stares directly into my eyes, as if she is the one that’s probing me.

Her will is strong. But I have her in my grasp. I search her mind and come up with formulas and mixtures and a deep abiding love for Carignan.

Marechal blinks a few times after I release her. She glares at me as she pulls open the side of her white lab coat. Within her coat are a pair of cutting shears.

“If you hurt my sister, you should know that I carry sharp things in my back pocket.”

Beside me, Gaius chuckles. I can tell his interest is piqued. I nod at Marechal, liking her even more myself.

“I mean your sister no harm,” I say. “Her care and protection are my highest priority.”

After a moment, Marechal nods. She shuts her lab coat. “I believe you.”

“And I believe you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

*E*ari

“WHERE’D YOU FIND HIM?” asks Mare.

“When I was out skydiving.”

Her intake of breath is sharp. So is the glare she turns on me.

What? It was an honest answer. And I was never one to lie to authority figures like teachers, my dad, or my older siblings. Though it was easy getting away with things when Mare was in charge of me. She was usually up to her arms in soil with her head in the vines. I’m not used to her giving me her full attention as she’s doing now.

“Another adventure junkie?” asks Mare. “What’s he into? Racing? Volcano jumping?”

My head tilts to the side as I regard my sister. Of course I told her about all of my adventures. But she was analyzing grape hybrids as I did so. So, I’m shocked to the core when she can rattle off some of the crazy stunts I’ve pulled.

“No,” I say. “Hadrian’s not into any of that.”

There’s an unsaid question mark at the end of my statement. Because I’m not exactly sure if Hadrian is into

adrenaline sports or not. He had given me the idea for plank walking. But had he done it? Is that how he knew?

It hits me then. I really don't know much about Hadrian, my lover, my boyfriend. The man I'm ready to give my virginity to without a second thought. The man I let do wicked things to me that I had never even known were options in the bedroom.

What I do know is how he makes me feel; safe and secure. It just goes to show that sometimes it pays to take a risk.

However, I'm not feeling the itch to jump out of a plane tonight. Or to walk between high-rises in the morning. Nope. There is a new itch. This itch is lower in my body and more centralized. I want Hadrian to take me back to his bed and –

"It's that serious?" Mare's eyebrows are raised so high they form golden arches near her hairline.

She's staring at me. I have her full attention. Probably for the first time in years.

She gasps, but in an exaggerated way that ends in a grin. "He's plucked your berry."

"Mare!"

In the distance, I see Hadrian's head lift. His gaze finds mine. It's like he's in tune with my every move. I feel his bright green eyes roam over me in the darkness. I am heated just by his look.

I have two pairs of eyes on me, his and Mare's. Luckily, Hadrian is too far away to hear this embarrassing conversation.

"We're sisters," says Mare. "We can talk about these things. Especially since you grew up without *Maman*. I should've sat you down earlier and had this talk."

"We are not having this talk." I can feel the flush creeping across my cheeks and I turn away from my sister.

Like any parental figure who wants to both embarrass their charge and at the same time educate them, Mare goes

on as though she didn't hear me, or is just ignoring me. "You had that health class in school. I remember I signed the permission slip for it."

Mare was over eighteen when I was in high school, so our father allowed her to behave like a guardian when it came to school and after school activities. It was great on some levels. I got to go on coed camping trips and even a study abroad where the students far outnumbered the chaperones. But there were drawbacks to having your twenty-year-old, data-minded sister as your guardian.

"You had cable hooked up in your room with all the channels," Mare is saying. "And the internet. I assumed you'd figure it out."

I put my head in my hands. For someone who makes fine wine, Mare has no filter. She will talk about skinning grapes in the same conversation as the mating rituals of fruit flies and then over to the nitrogen content in manure. No, she was not adopted. I asked.

I chance a peek between my fingers. Hadrian's gaze is still locked on me. And he's grinning like he knows what we are talking about. I assume it's because he can see my red cheeks from the distance...and under the moonlight?

"But I suppose there's a lot of misinformation on the internet," Mare continues. "Especially on the porn sites."

I can hear Hadrian's chuckle from where I sit. Not only is he great at catching me when I fall, but he can also hear over long distances when I'm being embarrassed, too? My head goes back into my hands. Mare is oblivious, so she keeps up the sex education.

"Orgasms are not normal for women. Multiple orgasms are a fantasy written in bad porn scripts. In fact, seventy-five percent of all women never reach an orgasm during intercourse. Many never reach one in their lifetime."

Huh? That's not my first experience or my second with Hadrian. I must be one of the rare anomalies then. I'd had multiple orgasms without intercourse.

Now both Hadrian and Gaius are looking this way. Though Gaius is focused on Mare. His dark brows are lifted as he regards my sister, as though antlers are growing out of her head.

"I just don't want you to be disappointed when the time comes," Mare is saying. "Hadrian seems to care about you."

The pink washes from my cheeks as I turn back to her and speak my truth. "I trust him with my life." I want to make her understand how important this man is to me, what his simple touch has done for me. "He makes me feel alive again."

Mare's hand comes to my low back. It's a comforting weight. Her touch travels up my back and settles in my heart, like a warm blanket.

"I know this last year has been hard on you with... everything," she says. "Cari, I want you to know that, if you decide you don't want anything to do with this place anymore, if it's too painful to be here and you want to sell, I'll understand."

Looking at my sister now, a memory from when I was young rises to the forefront of my mind. I remember her holding my hand when I learned to ride a bike. I remember her arms around me, hugging me when our mom died. I remember her lips pressed to my forehead, telling me everything was going to be all right, that she was there for me.

"It's not your fault that he's gone, Cari."

"I know."

Mare brushes a tear from the corner of my eye. "He would've wanted you to live, to walk away from that accident. He would've done anything for you to survive."

"I know. He said so before he died."

I have never told anyone that before. Not either of my siblings. Not the therapist who tried to help me deal.

"He told me to get out of the car and live," I confess. "I've been walking around like the living dead for months."

I've been so numb. The adventures, the adrenaline, it was the only way I felt alive."

Mare runs her hand over my brow and down my back. Her touch sparked old memories of summer picnics out in the vineyard, cold winter nights watching Christmas movies under a wool blanket.

"And now?" she asks.

I look up at the night sky. I haven't seen the sun for two days but it feels like a new dawn.

My gaze lands on Hadrian as he walks to me. My heart races, my blood pulses, my breath quickens. All with my feet planted on the ground and my body sitting still.

"He brought me back to life."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*H*adrian

I scoop Cari into my arms. Lifting her up and out of the lawn chair. The glass of wine she holds spills. It is one of her sister's special hybrids, a good bottle. But I do not care.

I brought her back to life, she said. She has no idea what those words do to me. What they mean to me.

For the first time in my second life, I feel no pain. I feel no shame. Death does not taunt me. Cari's arms around me, her smiling face, they outshine my memory of standing in sunlight. It's as though I can feel the sun's rays and they warm me instead of burning me.

Is this what Cari feels? Is this what it is to feel alive? I had forgotten. But holding her in my arms, the memories are coming back.

I put my nose in her hair, burrowing into the side of her neck. Her vein pulses as though it knows its new master. The jugular punches me in the mouth, taunting me to take a sip of her sweet nectar.

Oh Fates, how I want this woman. How I need her. In my mouth. On my cock. In my very veins.

But I can wait. We have time. We have her whole life.

I trace my lips from her throat to the underside of her chin before I take her lips. She is sweet heat, salty sass, and spicy strength in one serving. And she is all mine. Wrapping my hand around her neck, I tilt her back to take more.

From the side of my shoulder, I hear a rumble. The sound does not detract me from my mission of consuming Carignan. The disruption sounds again, deeper this time, insistent.

It's Gaius clearing his throat.

I tear my mouth away from Carignan and flash my fangs. I will not share her. Best friend or not. Blood brother or not, I will rip his *petite* head from his body before I let him put his dainty hands on her.

Instead of challenging me for Carignan, Gaius raises his brow. He tilts his head and nudges it to the side a couple of times. It's like he's trying to tell me something in an unspoken language.

From my peripheral vision, I see what he's trying to say. I'd forgotten we have an audience. Marechal, the sister. Luckily, she is sitting on the other side of me so she doesn't see my fangs.

I retract my teeth, take a deep breath, and set Cari down. But I do not let her go. I will never let her go.

"We can have dinner another night, Cari," says Marechal. "I see you're a bit... preoccupied at the moment."

Carignan is dazed. Her gaze is hazy and unfocused. Pride wells up inside of me. I did that to her.

The simplest things about her bring me the greatest amount of pleasure. Her honesty. Her vulnerability. Her clear and tangible desire for me, and only me.

"If you're not too busy," Gaius turns to Marechal, "I'd love to preoccupy you."

"I beg your pardon?" Marechal peers at Gaius over her glass and her glasses.

I can't tell if she caught Gaius' sexual intent or not. He's been sneaking covetous glances at her since we arrived. When she began her ridiculous talk of the myth of the female orgasm, I knew that all that Gaius heard was a gauntlet being thrown down.

He'll have her in his bed before the sun comes up, of that, I have no delusion. Most women drop their panties at the quirk of Gaius's brow. But looking again at Marechal and her studious gaze, I can see sexual satisfaction is not the direction her mind headed towards.

"Oh, you mean you'd like to talk about your little problem with your tool."

Gaius' smirk drops. "My what?"

"The tools you'll need to fight root rot. I'm sure that like me, you can easily get wrapped up in vines."

Gaius makes a choked sound. Carignan's cheeks heat. Even my little innocent gets the double entendre. Her sister remains oblivious.

"I didn't realize we were having guests for dinner?"

The new arrival looks familiar to me. But I can't place him. Not until he takes a stiff step towards me, his lips curling in distaste, his Chianti-brown eyes flashing in disapproval. Then I remember where I know him from.

"Hey, Arneis." Cari goes over to the man and embraces him. "I want you to meet my boyfriend. Hadrian, this is my brother."

The recognition is now a two-way street. We bumped into each other at Club Toxic. Frangelico had taunted the man when I was on my way out of Club Toxic. Though there's knowledge in his gaze, he doesn't make our connection plain.

"Boyfriend?" says Arneis. His lips curl.

I've never had to do the parent or sibling thing. Domitia was half a millennium old when she turned me, and many of her sirens were long gone, by her own hand. I knew

growling and baring my teeth was not the way to go in this meet and greet. I have no idea what to do otherwise.

"Hadrian and Gaius own the vineyard a few miles away," says Marechal.

Arneis does not look impressed. "You're in the wine business? Upstarts?"

"My family has had vineyards for hundreds of years," I say, knowing that the Durand vineyard is less than one hundred years old.

Arneis' brow quirks, but only slightly. "If you're looking to buy this place, and trying to get a leg up by dating my sister, you can cut ties. I already have a buyer lined up."

"Arneis," says Cari. "What a horrible thing to say. Papa would be ashamed."

Cari's older brother grits his teeth. His glare remains on me and not his little sister. I don't catch a spark of shame in his dark brown eyes. He doesn't look directly at me.

Does he know of the paranormal world? Is he clued into vampires and what we can do? It's against the rules. But Frangelico is king here, so he can break the rules if he wants.

"You should know I've decided I don't want to sell," says Cari. "This place is a part of me. It's a part of Papa. I don't want to let it go."

Arneis turns from me now. He whips around to face Carignan. "Don't be rash, Carignan."

I am beside her, ready to knock this pompous ass into the middle of the vineyard if he dares bring any aggression on her. But by the looks of it, I will not have to.

Carignan puts her hands on her hips and faces off against her brother who has a couple of inches on her. "Don't be rude, Arneis. I know my own mind. I'm not a child."

"You've been behaving like one all year," he says. And then his features soften. He brings his hands to her

shoulders. "You're not well enough to make this decision. I think you need help."

"Help?" Marechal steps up to the other side of Carignan. She puts her hand on Carignan's hip and tugs her younger sister towards her. "What are you talking about, Arneis?"

"She needs psychiatric help, Marechal. We can't deny it anymore. The skydiving, the racing, and now this." His hand waves in my direction. "She's making reckless choices. We should commit her."

"Touch her and I don't care what blood runs through your fingers, I will break each one just above the knuckle."

Arneis takes a step back at my threat. Marechal looks between the two of us. She's clearly upset with her brother, but my words give her pause. Gaius is at my back. I'm not sure if he's there to aid or stop me. All I care about is Carignan. She places herself between me and her brother.

But she faces me.

Her hands rest on my chest. If she tells me to back down, I will. For now.

"I want what's best for her," Arneis says after a tense silence.

"You're looking at him," I say.

Once again, Arneis' lips curl. Once again, he does not look impressed. "We'll see about that. This isn't over."

Arneis looks to Carignan, then to Marechal. Before he goes, he gazes out at the vineyard, as though it is another family member that turned on him.

"I need a drink," says Marechal after her brother storms off.

"Pour me one, too," says Gaius.

I pull Carignan into my arms. I run my hands up and down her back, trying to infuse warmth into her after that scene.

"He's not usually like that," says Cari.

I don't care. If Arneis thinks he can take her away from me by medical hold or a snip of a harness, he is mistaken. I

will happily rip him limb from limb. I'd make it look like an accident, of course.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*E*ari

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” I ask from the passenger seat.

Hadrian shifts through the gears of the sports car like he’s slicing through a piece of cake. He takes the turns with one hand while the other moves from the gear stick to my knee and back again. I want him to stick to a steady speed, or even slow down, whatever it will take for him to keep his hands on me.

Gaius stayed behind to talk vine health with Marechal. I don’t think they’ll end up in bed. Though I got a decent helping of Mare’s full attention tonight, I’m certain that was the top portion of her daily quota of consideration away from her work.

Arneis stormed off after that awful display. I have no idea what got into him. Or the measuring contest that got underway between him and Hadrian.

Well, maybe I do. A mental institution? Really? My brother already sent me to a therapist and I followed her prescription.

Okay, not to the letter. But her advice worked. I am back in a car right now.

Hadrian speeds through the streets. My heart races as he takes a hairpin turn with only one hand on the steering wheel. I want to ask him to slow down. But my voice is in my throat. I click on the seat belt and hold onto the edge of my seat.

"We're just going to make a quick stop in Tucson," he says, answering the question I forgot I'd even asked. "Then I'll take you home."

He removes his hand from my knee. Instead of reaching for the gear shift, he reaches up and brushes his knuckles down my cheek. My fingers unclench from the seat. My body warms with only the slightest touch from him.

"I'm sorry about Arneis."

"Don't mention it again," Hadrian says.

But I have to. "It was just the shock of it all. My decision to keep the business. And you're my first boyfriend."

"Your first?" He takes his eyes off the road to glance at me.

"Only."

He grins as he takes another turn, his green gaze makes me feel like a priceless gem. "We're going to keep it that way."

This relationship between us should not be moving this fast. We've only just met two nights ago. But there are many cases of love at first sight. Tons of movies and books about it. I wonder if this is love that I'm feeling as we do eighty miles per hour in a forty zone.

"You don't think we're going too fast?" I voice my concern.

Hadrian removes his hand from my face and places it back on the wheel. The speedometer on the dash ticks down as he engages the brake.

"No," I say. "I mean us. What's between us. It's happening so fast. I mean, we barely know each other."

We're in the heart of the city of Tucson. I recognize a few of the buildings around us by the high rises in the skyline,

but I haven't been to this particular street before. He's parked in front of a club. The people walking in and out look dazed as though they drank too much and won't remember the good time they had inside.

Hadrian reaches over. He unstraps me from my belt. He lifts me up out of the passenger seat and brings me into the driver's seat with him.

After settling me in his lap, he asks, "What do you want to know?"

I look into his eyes. They are clear, open books. I know nothing about this man. But what I do know is that I have access to everything inside him.

His every thought. His every wish. I need but ask. He would give me his all.

So why am I holding back?

"I just want to know one thing," I say. "One thing that you want me to know about you."

Hadrian opens his mouth. Then closes it. He swallows hard. After a moment he places my hand on his heart. "I want you to know that it's never felt like this for me before."

The warmth from his chest seeps from his flesh and into my fingertips. Something pulses in the palm of my hand. Then it arrows straight to my heart.

"You've been in lo-." I cough to cover my flub. "I mean you've had other lovers before? Of course, you had other lovers."

Hadrian unfurls my fingers from his chest and brings my palm to his lips. "Only one."

That arrow in my heart twists. But not painfully. He's turned a lock and the floodgates rush open. My eyeballs go to my hairline and I see my skull.

But I temper my response. He did say one. There had been someone else before me.

"Domitia?" I repeat the name I'd heard earlier tonight.

Of all that's happened between us in the last forty-eight hours, it's those four syllables that make Hadrian wince.

What had Viri said she'd done to him? Put his private parts in a vice? I wonder what he meant by that metaphor?

"You loved her?" I ask.

"I...?"

I hear the question in that single letter. His gaze clouds. He squints, looking off into the night. Finally, Hadrian sighs and rests his forehead on my chest. I cradle his head like he is a child in need of comfort.

"Where is she?" I ask.

"Dead." He takes a deep breath and lets it out before he continues. "I never thought I'd feel... anything again. And then you fell into my arms."

Hadrian lifts his head from my chest. My hand still cups his face. He rests all of the weight of his worries and cares there.

"Fast or slow," he says, "I don't care about the speed. All I know is I want to feel this way forever."

"Me too," I agree.

His kiss is slow. His lips take their time on the curve around my lower lip. As they reach the bend of my top lip, the speed and the urgency increases. Neither of us pumps the brakes as we crash into one another. Our mouths are on a high-speed chase that just might end in our total destruction.

He kisses my forehead tenderly when he pulls away. Then my eyelids. Followed by my nose. He shifts in his seat. I note he wasn't wearing his seatbelt, but I don't comment.

"Do you want me to wait in the car?" I ask when he reaches for the door handle.

"No." He opens the car door and steps out with me in his arms. "We won't be inside for long. But stick close to me."

"Is this place dangerous?"

"Your life will never be in danger with me."

Hadrian places me on the ground and takes my hand. Our fingers twine as we walk to the closed doors of the club. The sign overhead reads Club Toxic. I don't think I've

ever heard of this place. When the doors open and my mouth gapes, I see why.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*H*adrian

I KEEP my hold on Carignan tight as we leave the writhing bodies of the top floor and descend into the dungeon. The first time I came through these doors, the deviant acts and depraved inhibitions had no effect on me. But when Cari hesitates on the threshold and presses her ass back into my groin, I get an immediate rise.

I wrap my arms around her. Partly for her protection. Mostly as a display of my possession of her. It's paramount that every man, monster, and beast in this room recognize upfront that this woman has been claimed.

She hasn't even entered the room and her scent already has a few nostrils flaring. I catch the eye of a tall, wiry vampire. My vision is sharp, so I see the glint of fang. I flash mine fully, hissing a low warning. The vampire lowers his gaze and moves on.

Carignan's fingers tremble as they search for mine. She entwines her hands with mine and squeezes. I squeeze back to reassure her. But as her scent wafts up to my nose, I'm not sure that it's fear that I'm scenting on her.

I take in the dungeon through her eyes. The naked woman strapped to the Saint Andrew's Cross moaning in pleasure as a man flogs her bare cunt. A row of men and women bent over spanking benches as canes play a drum roll upon their asses. In the open play area, two males hold a woman in between them as they double penetrate her ass and pussy, pumping in and out in time to the music. The woman's head lolls back and from side to side in ecstasy. I'm not entirely sure she's still conscious.

Cari squeezes my hand again and presses further back into my chest. I hold her to me, assuring her that no one will touch her.

That's why I brought her in with me. The hell would I leave her in the car on the street. My suspicions of her brother aside, wolves and vampires roam these parts freely. The safest place for her will always be by my side, in my arms.

"This is a sex club," she says.

"Yes."

"Are you... into this?"

Is it my imagination? Is it wishful thinking? Or do I note a hitch of interest in her voice?

I have every intention of training her in the ways of the erotic arts. Or what is known today as BDSM. But in private.

Having her arms wrapped around me earlier and her fingers entwined with mine now is a new kind of joy. But I ache to tie her down, have her entirely immobile while I pleasure her to unconsciousness so that when she wakes from her orgasmic stupor there will be no doubt in her world that she is mine.

For now, I follow her gaze. It is on the woman tied to a Saint Andrew's Cross.

"Does that interest you?" I whisper in her ear. The tip of my tongue touches the cone of her ear and I taste the heat that has spread from her cheeks to her ears.

Her head tilts back. Her gaze flicks to me. Then down to the ground.

Perfectly submissive.

"I..." She bites her lower lip as she sneaks another glance. "I don't know."

Lies. She will get a punishment for not speaking her true desires.

"Maybe," her gaze lifts. Her fingers twist, pulling and tugging at the skin around my knuckles. "But not with an audience. I don't want to be passed around or for others to see me like that."

I spin her around to face me. My grip on her shoulders is a bit rough, but I need her to understand this most important fact in her new life. "You belong to me."

Her gaze hoods, as though her lids have grown heavy with desire. Her chest lifts as she takes in a deep breath. The outline of her taut nipples is clear beneath the fabric of her dress. Praise the Fates she does not resist my claim because she no longer has a choice in the matter.

"No one else will ever taste what's between your thighs or in your veins."

"My veins?" Her fog of desire clears momentarily.

I have no idea how long I can hold my tongue about what I am from her. I already know that I can't hold my fangs at bay. A pang of desperate hunger is growing inside me. Blood bags simply will not do any longer. At least Viri will be happy.

"Why, if it isn't the Prince of Pain, himself."

I look over Carignan's shoulder to find Frangelico approach. The Vampire King is not alone. His queen is with him tonight.

I've heard of the wolf who claimed Frangelico's heart and drank his blood. She is a beauty. White blonde hair, long limbs, and a feral look in her eyes that warn that she isn't entirely tame.

"Such manners," purrs Frangelico. "You've brought a fresh toy to play with? A delicacy at that. She smells untouched."

"She's mine," I growl, tucking Carignan behind me.

"Understood." Frangelico smiles, clearly unfazed by my show of dominance.

I am in his house. Surrounded by his sireds. Besides that, Frangelico is ancient. He wouldn't need help disposing of me. But I need his help. So I take a deep breath and try to focus.

"She will not be touched without your express permission," says Frangelico. "You're welcome to stay and play as long as you like."

"We're not here to play," I say. "I need information."

"The man who wanted no part in our politics has come to me two nights in a row to ask a favor?" Frangelico turns to his bride who has not taken her gaze off me. "Selene, will you take Hadrian's guest to the bar for a drink while we talk?"

Kissing Cari's knuckles, I relinquish my hold on her and hand her to Selene. Carignan's gaze is questioning. I can only nod my head, hoping she will trust me. She does and turns to go with Selene.

Selene is a newly made vampire. But she is also a wolf. She has a modicum of my trust. But I still track their movements and don't take my eyes off Cari.

"What can I do for you this time?" asks Frangelico.

"Arneis Durand. What is he to you?"

"Well, seeing as you're here with his baby sister, I feel I should be asking you that."

"He was here two nights ago. Why?"

"A bribe." Frangelico shrugs.

My teeth clench until my molars grind. If Frangelico had anything to do with Cari's near-deaths, I don't care how many of his sireds I will have to gut, I will start a war.

"A zoning issue I paid to have swept under the table," he continues. "Standard political swamp. Arneis Durand likes to pretend he's above it all. And for a time he was. But now he's cash poor."

"Cash poor, you say?"

"Durand Vineyard has fallen on hard times since the father's death. But the enterprise is still quite lucrative. Arneis wants to sell to pay off debts, but the older sister is tenacious. I've made a very generous offer."

"The Durand Vineyard is not for sale any longer."

"Really?" Frangelico raises a brow.

"Really," I insist.

Frangelico shrugs again. I'm certain it's no skin off his back. The vampire is richer than a Saudi prince. "As long as my personal cellar is stocked, we won't have any problems."

I let out the breath I'd been holding. This was not exactly a dead end into who sabotaged Cari's safety harness. Arneis has motive. I need to get the man alone, where I can force him to look me in the eye and tell me the truth. But that will have to wait.

"My offer stands to stay and play," says Frangelico.

My gaze has not left Cari. Her back is to me. I have a clear view of the outline of her ass. My mind is outlining all the things I want to do with it.

Yes, I think we will stay to play.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

*E*ari

THE DOOR SNICKS closed behind us. I stand in darkness. A second later there is light but only enough to see what's before me.

On a small platform is a large apparatus that looks like a giant tripod. At the center of the three legs of the contraption hangs a metal hoop. I try to take in a deep breath, but my lungs are too busy pushing air out as I pant.

What have I gotten myself into?

Hadrian walks around the tripod and begins checking its knobs and gears. His face is all business as he does so. Complete focus and concentration, like he's done this before.

Of course, he has. He tied me up expertly last night. I watch him now as he takes varying lengths of rope.

"The Prince of Pain. Why do they call you that?" I ask, partly to distract myself from what I've agreed to. Do I really even know what I've agreed to?

"It's my old job," he says as he inspects the rope, running his fingers along the twined strands.

I'm not sure what he's looking for. It all looks like it's unbreakable to me.

"Which was?" I prompt him when he does not elaborate.

Hadrian's gaze flicks to mine. "I used to hurt people, Carignan. Does that scare you?"

"So you were mafia?"

"No. Worse. But not anymore. Not for a long time." He places the rope aside but doesn't come to me. "Aren't you going to ask?"

"Ask what?"

"If I will hurt you?"

"No." I shake my head with certainty. "I know you would never."

The look he gives me is inscrutable. But I know I've said the right thing. It was an easy answer. It's the truth.

Although I'm nervous about what's about to happen, I have not a single doubt in my mind that Hadrian would never hurt me. I might feel a bit of pain. But the times he's bound me the pain was fleeting. The pleasure was exquisite. I'm happy to go through a bit of agony now that I know what's on the other side.

Hadrian holds his hand out to me. I go to him without hesitation.

"Don't we need a safe word?" I ask.

He grins down at me. He dips his head down and kisses my nose before turning me around. I feel his fingers in my hair, gathering my strands and tugging at them as he weaves my hair into a braid.

"No safe word. I know you. I know how you respond to me. I know what you need. Better than you do, it would appear. Just tell me what you need and I'll give it to you."

Well, that's easy. "I need you."

"I know," he says as he lets me go.

The long braid falls and taps between my shoulder blades. With fast, sure fingers, he peels the dress from my body, followed by my underwear. I'm naked before him and

I've never felt so free. Hadrian takes a place beside the tripod.

"Stand here, Cari."

His voice is full of command. It sends a shiver down my spine. I go where he instructs me to go beneath the tripod.

He picks up a length of rope and walks toward me. I stare at the rope and my breath catches in my throat. Any tension releases from my body on a strained exhale as my nipples tighten to hard points.

"Is this what you want?" he asks.

I look from Hadrian then back to the rope. He stands before me; tall and gorgeous, eyes intent on my body as he charts a path to my pleasure. My skin prickles as the air conditioning kicks on from above blowing at the fine hairs on my forearms.

My ears perk up. My eyes are so focused. It is sensation overload.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Hands."

My hands come up on their own accord and I present my wrists.

"*Ragazza brava.*"

He takes my wrists in his hands. His touch is electric. He guides my hands behind my back, folding one forearm over the other. His chest presses into my back, his hips and torso meet my ass. His belt buckle brushes against the skin of my lower back.

He wraps the rope around my wrist. The feel of the ropes and their restriction ignite something within me. I am at his mercy, the mercy of his sure hands.

Hadrian rests his chin in the crook of my neck as he pulls the ropes taut. My head lolls back to rest against his cheek. I tilt my head up, offering him my lips.

"Spread those pretty thighs for me, *stellia.*"

I open my legs, a little off balance since my hands are tied behind my back.

“Ragazza brava.”

He kneels behind me. I hear a cap flip open. Then I feel fingers on my pussy lips. I gasp, almost teetering over from my wide-legged stance. But Hadrian lends me his chest for balance. The fingers on my pussy lips are warm and wet. He rubs lube on my clit and labia, slowly, lightly, until I am panting. With just that light touch, I am close to orgasm. Hadrian pulls his fingers away from me as soon as I start to tremble.

I hear the cap open again. Then I feel the same wet warmth on my anus.

Wait? What? But I don't have time to reject his touch at my exit.

He circles my puckered hole a few times before he enters. My eyes flutter at the sensation as he pushes his finger in. I gasp again as he pushes in knuckle-deep.

With his finger up my ass, it takes a moment for my mind to work. Is he about to take my anal virginity before penetrating me vaginally?

But he withdraws his finger. I clench at the vacancy. My eyes open as he rounds me. He places a pink anal plug on the stand before us. Hadrian examines the plug and then regards me.

Does he want my permission? I can't open my mouth to form words. I'm not sure what I'd say if he asks. Do I want something up my ass? I'd never even considered it before just a moment ago.

Hadrian walks behind me with the pink plug. A second later, I feel the cool plastic of the pink plug greet my anus.

“Bear down,” he says.

I do as I'm told. The plug slides home without any obstruction. Hadrian gives it a firm push. I feel the end of the round suction stopper on my ass cheeks. The plug isn't painful, but neither is it pleasant. There is a slight discomfort, as though my body knows it shouldn't be there.

Hadrian pulls my chest back, forcing me to stand up straight. The plug changes angles and a feeling of fullness takes over in my body, leaving me feeling invaded. The fullness is delicious, and it spreads throughout my body.

"Do not come," Hadrian commands. "If you come now it will be the only time I allow it. Do you understand?"

No, no I don't. "Yes." I squeak.

"Just wait for it, Cari," he whispers in my ear. "It'll be big and beautiful, I promise."

Hadrian comes back to stand before me. There is rope in his hands. He wraps the rope around my waist, his thumb and forefinger brushing over my flesh. I am so hypersensitive that I sense the difference in temperature of his fingernails as he threads the ropes, and then the pads of his fingers as he pulls the rope taut against my skin.

He walks around me as I stand on display for him. Hadrian's touch makes my nipples hard, but his gaze pierces them into fine points. His breath against my abdomen makes my pussy slick. And then there is the plug.

It's too much sensation. I have to shut my eyes. But the loss of one of my senses does not de-tune me. Desire is a fuming cloud in the air that invades my lungs with every inhale.

And then there is the touch of the ropes. The thread Hadrian uses is silky and coarse at the same time. It moves like satin on my skin as he makes his loops. Every time I make the slightest movement against the grain, I meet with a delicious friction. I have to fight to keep still and not squirm for the sheer pleasure of it.

Hadrian ends the first bit of knot work with an intricate large node that rests on my belly button. The weight of it sparks desire in my gut, and that desire sinks lower into my throbbing, wet pussy. I am on fire and soaked at the same time.

Next, Hadrian passes the ropes between my legs. I nearly buckle over as the dry rope hits my slick wetness. He

keeps me upright as he pulls the ropes up the crack of my ass like a g-string. With his fingers, he arranges the ropes at my pussy on either side of my clit. The ropes that hit my crack push the butt plug another millimeter inside of me.

My lips are trembling at this point. There is a tremor in my hands as I try to hold still as he continues. This is the sweetest agony I've ever experienced in my life.

Somehow I have the presence of mind to remember Hadrian's warning. He told me that if I came without his permission it would be the only time I came tonight. I grit my teeth, ball my hands into fists, and try to rein in the increasing pleasure.

Hadrian continues the knot work behind me until another heavy knot rests at the base of my spine. Each tug of his ropes brushes against the bind at my pussy. The ropes squeeze around my clitoris. My legs are shaking. When I begin panting, Hadrian stops. He comes around the front and stares at me. He doesn't need to use his words to warn me not to come.

"I didn't," I say. "But I really, really want to."

Hadrian's all-business veneer cracks a smile. "You're being a very good girl, Cari. I'm very pleased with you. I just might let you come sooner than I'd planned."

My body sags in relief, but the moment I let go of my hold I feel an orgasm knock on the door. I grit my teeth and press my heels into the floor. Hadrian waits a moment, watching me. His expression tells me he expects me to fail at this moment, to come against his command. Hell, I expect me to fail at this moment.

But I don't. I get a hold of myself before my inner muscles clench. I raise my chin at him in triumph. Hadrian smirks, but I can tell he is impressed.

He reaches the rope over my head and loops it on to the ring of the human-sized tripod. He gives the rope a tug, and I am airborne.

The ropes take all of my weight and leave me without a care in the world. They cradle me in the twine, leaving me with nothing to hold on to. There is nothing holding me back. I am restrained, but I am flying. I am free. This is pure bliss.

Hadrian gives me a gentle shove, and I am truly flying. As the slight breeze hits me in the face the ropes press against my pussy, giving me a rough friction. On the way back, I feel the pressure in my ass. It pushes the plug even deeper.

There is nothing I can do now. There is no floor to ground myself into. I clench my hands, but it isn't enough. An orgasm is coming soon whether I want it to or not, and Hadrian is nowhere near finished toying with me.

Next, he wraps a chain around my breast. The cold metal is a shock to my system. It brings my attention from the heat between my thighs on my pussy and ass. My mind reels between the cold chain, the friction of the rope, and the heat both materials create. And then there is Hadrian, whose hands continue to tug at the ropes and run against my skin.

I am wrapped up in all of these sensations when a buzzing sound starts. I open my eyes to see a Magic Wand in Hadrian's hands. Just the disturbance of the air caused by the motor of the vibrator sends shivers down my spine.

Hadrian runs the vibrator all along my body, over spots I'd never considered to be sensitive. He rests the vibrator on my nipple, already a tight rock. The chains rattle over my skin causing the sensations to multiply tenfold.

I pant. I beg. I plead.

Almost instantly I am rewarded when he runs the vibrator over my pussy. It doesn't come in direct contact with my labia because there are ropes in the way. Hadrian puts the wand on the ropes. The vibrations go through the ropes and directly to my clit. My hips jerk making the ropes seesaw against my front and back openings.

Hadrian takes the vibrator away. "You want it?"

"Yes! Yes, Hadrian, yes."

"Beg me."

"Whaa?"

He turns the vibrator off and crosses his arms.

"Please, Hadrian. Please let me come."

With a cocky grin, he turns the vibrator back on. Just the sound has me jumping out of my skin.

"Please, Hadrian. Please." It becomes a chant. "Please, please, please. Please, please, please."

Finally, he puts the vibrator back on my thigh. The closer it gets to my core, the more my body tenses in anticipation. My stomach flutters. My panting diaphragm causes the ropes to rub against my skin.

My heart pounds. I am breathless. I tingle all over.

Finally, Hadrian waves his Magic Wand over my happy place.

I look up at him, pleading, delirious.

He gives me the slightest of nods.

Sparks fly like in a magician's spell. It's like my body is liquid and the vibrator is an electric cord. I lose control of my limbs as they jerk in each direction in response to my clenching inner muscles.

The orgasm starts on my clit but then travels down the rope to my labia. As I clench internally, the butt plug dings pleasure sensors I never knew existed, which then zip back down to my labia and back up to my clit.

The cycle repeats on loop until I black out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

*H*adrian

I SHOULD STOP. I know this, but I can't bring myself to. Cari is breathtaking when she orgasms.

Her nipples strain like a berry so ripe it's ready to fall off the vine with no aid. Her belly trembles in wave-like ripples. Her round ass clenches molding to perfect globes. But it's her lips I can't take my eyes or my mouth off.

She makes the most perfect sounds. Most of the time it's my name she says. But she softens all the consonants until they're close to vowels.

I want to hear her say it over and over again, so I keep the vibrator pressed to her clit as the pleasure wracks her body. The moment one orgasm begins to crest, I move the wand to her ass in search of a deeper anal orgasm. When her back bends, I press the wand into her pussy, angling the device towards her g-spot to keep the sweet agony rolling through her.

She begs me. To stop? To continue? Her words aren't exactly intelligible.

The only reason that I do relent and move the wand from her is that I ache to have her in my arms. When the buzzing of the vibrator stops, her pants and moans permeate the room. I lift her from the suspension apparatus.

Her body comes to me with no protest, no push back. She is limp as I cut the bonds that bind her perfect body. But even as I cut each tie, I feel her winding her way around my limbs, my heart, and if I still have it, my soul.

I had always thought love was pain. That it should hurt.

Pain was the body's response to stimulus. The sensation, the ache, the strain; it was the only thing Domitia gave to me. So I determined it must be love.

How wrong I was.

Cari wraps her arms around my neck. Her nails curl into the fabric of my shirt. Her nose burrows into my neck. Her eyelashes flutter closed on my cheek.

She trusts me completely. She has given me her complete surrender. I could do with her whatever I want and she would allow it.

Her feet, though they dangle over my lap, would not run away to another or kick out at me when annoyed. Her hands would not ball into fists when upset and strike me when in a rage.

She sits docile in my lap. With her arms around me. She doesn't see that just as I have her and will never let her go, her hold on me is absolute.

I am nearly at a loss as to how to receive her affection when kindness, tenderness, and care were so sparsely given to me in my entire lifetime.

Any time after laying with Domitia, I was left with a hollow feeling. I originally thought it was because she'd taken my soul. I always felt the need to be filled, and only she could fill it.

Not now.

Sitting with Cari in my arms, brushing strands of her hair away from her lovely face, cradling her bare, lush ass

over my straining erection, I feel so full that my fingers tingle. My tongue swells in my mouth, leaving me unable to speak. My chest expands, yet I find that there is more space within the cavity to give her more.

Is this love?

I don't care what it's called. I will fight to keep hold of this feeling. I will die if anything gets between myself and this sensation.

Carignan's eyelids flutter open. "Hey?"

"Hey."

"Are you ever going to actually fuck me? Like, in my vagina with your cock?"

I laugh. Then I throw back my head and bellow. Laughter is a familiar sound. But in my past, it was often preceded by cruelty.

The sound that leaves me doesn't have a trace of pain. I don't cower or wince at it. Neither does Carignan. Joy is a strange sensation. It will take some time for me to get used to it.

"Yes, my treasure. I will fuck you in your vagina with my cock. I will fuck you so hard and so thoroughly that night will become day. But not here. I don't want them to hear the screams."

"Am I that loud?" she asks.

"I will be that loud."

I am going to shout my devotion to this creature from the top of my lungs the moment my cock breaches her virginal skin. I will lay myself bare for her. When I do, the act will make me vulnerable. I might have a modicum of trust for Frangelico now that he's given me aid not once, but twice. But I'd never let any other paranormal, save my brothers, be close to me when I am so vulnerable.

There is a knock at the door. I barely contain my hiss as I glare at the wood of the door frame. My fangs break through my gums, but I don't flash them. I don't want to

scare Carignan. I don't know what she'll think when she finds out the monster I really am.

I yank a sheet from the supplies stored in a cabinet and wrap it around Cari. I know that no one would dare interrupt me. Save Frangelico.

When I crack open the door, I see that I am right.

"We have a problem," he says. "An informant in the police force called to warn me that we're about to be raided."

"Raided? But you said -"

"Apparently my politician friend that we spoke of earlier has broken our agreement."

Frangelico doesn't peer into the room to look at Carignan, but I catch his meaning. Arneis has betrayed him.

"Prepare your friend," he says. "There is a back way out."

Before Frangelico can shut the door, I hold out my palm to him. Frangelico stares at my open gesture a second before clasping his palm with mine. I may not have wanted him as an ally, but at this moment I am grateful that he looked out for me and mine.

He did not have to come to warn me. He could have let me get caught up in the raid. Especially if it would mean Arneis' sister might make the headlines; that would've been a convenient bit of payback for Arneis going back on the bribe he'd instituted.

But Frangelico came to me personally. He must truly have no ill will towards me despite his history with Domitia. I'm not yet ready to call him friend. But I suppose I can no longer call him my enemy.

"Looks like you're in a predicament," says Frangelico. "I don't envy you Sunday dinner with the family."

I shut the door and dress Cari quickly, ignoring her queries of what the matter is. I'll wait until she's out of harm's way to tell her that her brother isn't the man she believes him to be.

Carignan's legs are wobbly, so I carry her out of the room and through the back door Frangelico indicates. From my peripheral view, I see that all of the vampires are moving out of the dungeon. Only the humans are left behind.

I strap Cari into the passenger seat of my car. After I get in on the driver's side, I fire up the ignition. We take off just as the first siren wails onto the street.

"What just happened?" she asks.

"Just a little betrayal. Nothing for you to worry about."

I speed away from the scene. Pushing the car to its top speed, I ignore the traffic lights and signs. My need to get her back to my home trumps all. The sun will be up in a few hours and I want her safely tucked in before the first rays of dawn break.

The headlights that come out of nowhere remind me of the sun. For a moment, I am startled. One moment is all it takes for the crash to catch me off guard.

The tree comes out of nowhere. Then its limbs are everywhere. Through the front end of the car. Through the front of my chest.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

*E*ari

FOR AS LONG AS I live, I will never forget the sound of the crash that killed my father.

First, there was laughter. His. My Papa wasn't an overweight man, but he had a big-bellied laugh like a mall Santa. But his laugh went hehehe instead of hohoho.

He'd been laughing at me that night. I'd told a joke. I can't remember exactly what I said. I blocked that part out long ago. I only remember the sound of his laugh.

Hehehe. Deep, and resonant. He always closed his eyes when he laughed. I've always known that fact about him. I should've remembered it that night. Maybe if I hadn't made him laugh he wouldn't have shut his eyes. Maybe if he hadn't shut his eyes, he would still be here.

After his laugh, there was a gasp. His intake of breath was sharp and shallow. Probably because he'd been laughing and had exhaled most of his breath.

His eyes had gone wide. So wide, so white that I could make out the lights of the oncoming car in them.

Before I could face forward, I was being thrown back. My father was meticulous about car care, but I distinctly

remember the sound of metal on metal, clashing and scraping. The squeal of the brakes was like a record scratch to his laugh track.

Then the squeal of rubber on asphalt. It was like a scream, but not from a human throat. Like the rubber knew what was about to happen. Like it was mourning the loss that it was powerless to stop.

And then came the worst of the sounds. Metal folding into metal.

My father didn't scream. He said two words to me. Then he didn't make another sound. It was my voice that filled the gaps of the metal scraping. It was me that screamed.

Why was this all playing in my head again? Why was it so vivid? Like it was happening again.

I know I'm not back there at the scene of my father's death. I know that I am with Hadrian.

Hadrian. The man that I fell in love with at first sight. The man who I knew, after two nights and countless orgasms, that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

Why do I keep blacking out after each time we are together? Will I ever be able to handle his intense loving? Perhaps it just will take practice.

In any case, I don't want to live in the past any longer. I want to move beyond the nightmare that was my father's death. I want to forgive myself because there was nothing that I did wrong.

I'd made my father laugh a million times before that night. He'd only closed his eyes for a second, in the time it took him to blink. There was nothing that I could do to stop it.

It wasn't my fault. I understand that now.

With Hadrian by my side, I have remembered how to live again, how to love. He gives me all the adrenaline I need. It's coursing through my veins now as I open my eyes from the incredible loving he'd given to me inside the club.

I stretch my limbs against the cushion. My arms and legs are sore. But I expect that after being strung up with ropes and pleased to within an inch of my life.

I reach for Hadrian. Unlike the last time I woke up in his bed, he is there beside me. I feel his strong arms that held me so tightly the other night. He'd wrapped himself around me and told me nothing would ever hurt me while I was in his care.

So why does something feel wrong now? Why doesn't he reach out and wrap his arms around me? Why does Hadrian feel cold?

I open my eyes and see that we are not in his bed. We are not in the club. We are outside. Under a tree.

How did we get here? I turn to ask Hadrian and my ears fill with screams.

The car has split in two. The tree stands between the headlights. Tree limbs have fallen around us. One large branch is sticking into Hadrian's chest.

No. No. This is not happening to me. Not again.

Hadrian's eyes are closed, but there are crinkles in them. Not like my dad's whose eyes had remained open as I watched them go glassy and lifeless.

Hadrian sighs a long, low sound of pain. He's still alive. And I intend to keep him that way.

I press the buckle on my seatbelt. It loosens and I fling the strap away from my body. Ignoring the soreness in my legs, I climb over my seat to him.

What do I do? How do I save him? There's a fucking tree limb in his chest.

"Go," he says. "Live."

Karma is a true bitch. Those are the same words my Papa said to me before he died. I do not deserve this. I have been a good girl. I've never hurt anyone.

"You're not dying," I tell him.

Hadrian shuts his eyes as though he's weary. His hands come up to the limb and he tries to grip it.

"You shouldn't move it," I tug his hands away.

"Pull it out," he says.

"You'll bleed out. You'll die."

"I won't. I promise."

It's madness. It's impossible. But I believe him.

"Pull it out," he says.

I take a deep breath. I wrap my hands around the branch. My fingers do not meet at either end. I reach somewhere deep inside myself and I tug the branch.

I tug it like my life depends on it. Because my life does depend on it. If Hadrian dies, I will not go on. I can't. No amount of mental therapy or exposure therapy or adrenaline sports will keep me here in this life.

So, I tug with everything inside of me. Wonder of wonders, the branch comes free. But with it comes a lot of blood.

Hadrian coughs up blood. It splutters on me, landing on my lips. I know this is bad. Whenever anyone on TV has blood come out of their mouth it always means certain death.

But Hadrian takes a deep breath. He doesn't cough this time. I look down to see the skin around the gaping hole in his chest begin to knit before my eyes.

My limbs begin to shake as I watch the impossibility. Dizziness threatens to take me as I witness the inconceivable. My bladder threatens a mutiny as I crab walk backward and away from him.

"Cari. Cari, stop. You're hurt yourself."

My ass tumbles out of the passenger seat. When I land it's on a cushion of brittle twigs and broken glass from the windshield. There is a pain in my side. I look down and see the red stains on my dress. Through the ripped fabric, I see the gaping gash.

The wound is leaking blood. I feel lightheaded instantly. I'm losing too much blood. And unlike Hadrian, my skin isn't miraculously knitting itself back together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

*H*adrian

THE STAKE only penetrated deep enough to actually hurt. Not enough to end me. It's not the first time I've had something pierce my heart. This was how most arguments with Domitia used to end.

It would begin with shouting--hers. Then pleading--mine. She would screech that I was holding her captive. I would insist that I loved her. But my love was never enough. When I tried to hold onto her she'd go for my heart. She never sent the stake all the way through. She did twist it once when she was really pissed.

If you live long enough, history repeats itself.

But unlike Domitia, Cari pulls the stake from my heart. Cari brings me back to life. Cari makes me want to live.

With the bark gone from my internal organs, my healing has already begun. But I am in a whole other world of hurt.

Cari is wounded. I smell her blood before I see it. My mouth doesn't water at the potent mix of adrenaline and fear that seeps from her body. My fangs are ready to tear apart my own flesh to bandage hers.

The gash at her hip isn't deep enough to kill her. It's deep enough that she will need medical attention, and soon. The elements are not kind to the human body. They break so easily. I know. I am a master of breaking them down.

Out here in the wild, she is susceptible to all manner of infection. Or simply just losing too much blood. But I can heal her. I just need her to stop backing away from me.

"Carignan, stop. You'll hurt yourself."

"What are you? A demon?"

There's fear in her gaze. Her eyes bulge and she stops blinking, as though she's afraid that if she closes them I'll be on her.

I am on her. Not to hurt her. I would sooner carve out my heart and serve it to her on a platter than allow even her fingernails to break.

But her body trembles beneath me. Tears stain her cheek. Her chin wobbles. Her chest rises and falls in rapid motions.

She is in pain and in panic. Two of my favorite flavors. It makes my stomach turn now.

I want to take it all away. Her fear of me. Her pain. Her dawning knowledge of what I am. I don't want her to find out this way. But here we are.

"I am not a demon," I say. "I am..."

I am what? Because my first statement is a lie.

I am a killer. I am a torturer. I am a parasite. Nothing that any woman could ever truly love.

Carignan blinks rapidly. Her breathing has slowed so that she is taking full, deep breaths. Her body remains tense, but she's no longer backing away from me. She holds still.

"You saved my life," is what I finally say. "Let me save yours."

"Are you even alive?"

"Not before the day that I met you. You brought me back. You made me want to live. You gave me something to

live for. I will not let you die now."

I hold out my hand to her. She hesitates. Her gaze flicks over my fingers, my palms. I'd bound her not too long ago with these hands. I'd hoisted her up with my fingers. I'd held her to me with the press of my palms.

Carignan's gaze flicks to my face. I hold her gaze and latch on. I could so easily compel her.

She wants to trust me. She doesn't want to believe that I am a monster. But that is the truth.

I look away from her, no longer able to meet her gaze. I reach down to her hip, where her wound lays exposed. She jumps as I touch her side. But she doesn't pull away from me.

Opening my mouth wide, I let loose my fangs. The sharp points piercing my gums is a familiar pain. Added to that is something new. Cari's sharp intake of breath fills the night's silence. And then she says the word I can not.

"Vampire."

Instead of answering her, I bite my wrist. The blood spills from my veins and over my flesh.

Carignan's breathing is shallow as she watches it, like she is in a trance. I place the stream of blood against her flesh, mingling my blood with her own. Instantly, her blood loss stops. The wound begins to knit itself.

Once her skin is sewn back together, I lift my wrist to her mouth. "Drink," I command.

"You're going to turn me into a vampire?"

"No, my treasure. I just want to be sure you'll heal. Drink."

Still she hesitates. My patience has reached its end. I force command into my voice.

"Carignan, drink."

Her head comes closer. The heat of her breath touches my thumb. Her lips part. And then she pulls back. "Are you mind controlling me?"

"No."

"Have you ever mind controlled me?"

I growl. There's a battle raging inside me. I could press her head to my wrist and make her drink. That would be the most logical if the goal is to keep her healthy and alive.

But I am a man in love. And so I go the irrational, emotional route. "Yes."

Her eyes narrow as she sits up. "You made me do all those things? All those sex things?"

"Did I?" My voice is stony with indignation.

She grits her teeth. Before she turns away, I see the tears. "Did you make me fall in love with you?"

I reach out my other hand. Gently, I take her chin and turn her head back to face me. My features and my voice soften. "Did I?"

Cari meets my gaze. She doesn't answer. But we both know the truth.

Her gaze travels back to my ruined car. The front end is split. The windshield is shattered. Neither of us should have survived. But we have.

Where had that light come from? There is no other car in sight. Had I imagined it? If there was another driver, they left us for dead.

Could that have been Arneis' latest attempt? He clearly knew we were at the club. Could he have had us followed and driven us off the road?

"So you're a vampire?" Carignan hugs her arms around herself.

"Yes." I fight my need to replace her arms with my own.

Her gaze travels over my face, looking at me anew. I hold still under her perusal. But I see nothing change in her eyes. Only a new awareness.

I reach out and cup her cheek. Her arms fall away and she folds her hands in her lap. Her eyes turn to the blood still dripping out of my wrist.

"What happens if I drink that?" she asks. "Will you be able to read my mind? Track me anywhere?"

"I don't need your blood to compel you or to see into your mind."

"So you can see into my mind?"

I nod.

"Well, screw privacy laws then?" She waves her palm in the air as if brushing the notion away.

"Pretty much."

"And the tracking?" she asks.

"I'm only guilty of the normal type of stalking behavior. I would simply follow you to the ends of the earth."

"This is a lot, Hadrian." Her fingers tremble as she rubs at her forehead.

I take her hand in my own, smoothing the skin over her knuckles. "I told you I would tell you when you were ready."

"When would that have been?"

"My original plan was to wait until a decade or so."

Her brows lift as her shoulders cave inward.

"I said forever. I meant it."

"But you can live forever."

I pull her into my lap, making sure to avoid her wound even though it's now healed closed. "I've done forever. All I want in my life is your forever. When you die, I'm coming with you."

"That's seriously next level stalker."

"You say stalking, I say love."

For the last five minutes, Cari had held a mask of bravery on her face. It crumples now. Her features are naked, defenseless, exposed. "You love me?"

I rest my forehead against hers. "Isn't it obvious?"

Her head turns to my wrist. She takes a deep breath. Then she leans in. When she sticks out her tongue, my dick goes instantly hard.

She tests my blood with the tip of her tongue. Once. Twice. Then she wraps her lips around my wrist and pulls. She had my total devotion before. Now, with my blood on her tongue, I am her eternal slave.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

*E*ari

MY BOYFRIEND IS A VAMPIRE.

Okay.

I think I am taking it pretty well.

Best thing about having a vampire boyfriend so far? A little car crash can't kill him. So, that's a plus.

And he's a one man emergency room with his magical, healing blood. That'll come in handy for a girl who likes to laugh in the face of danger. Though I'm pretty sure my death-defying days are over.

Between being tied up earlier and crashing later, I'm pretty sure I've met my quota of adventures for life. I'm feeling a bit queasy after this rollercoaster. I want to slow down a bit. Starting now.

"Hadrian, stop. Slow down. I think I'm going to be sick."

We are tracing. For the lay folks that means running at top speeds through the night. The moon's light is all that I can make out as trees and brush whizz past me. Apparently, it's not dark when moving fast. Hadrian's running nowhere near the speed of light, but it's a lot faster than a race car.

Everything is a blur to my eyes. For the girl who likes speed, and heights, and danger, it's not going well with my stomach.

Maybe it was the pint of blood I'd just drank. Or the fact that I'd just been in a car accident. Or the fact that I found out my boyfriend is a fucking vampire.

But I'm playing it cool. Real cool. The picture of cool.

I turn away from Hadrian as I empty the contents of my stomach in his vineyard. Like the best boyfriend ever, he holds my hair back away from my face while I puke.

"I'm sorry," I say when I'm done.

"It's a lot to take in."

Understatement of the century.

Hadrian tugs his ruined shirt over his head and uses it to wipe my mouth. What's not ruined are his washboard abs. Neither are his pecs which flex as he moves. The skin covering his chest is completely healed, though smeared with dried blood. But it certainly doesn't look as though a tree branch was trying to take root.

I thought the tattoo on his chest might be ruined. It's not. It's as though it had never been scratched. Belatedly I wonder how he was able to get a tattoo if he heals so quickly? Maybe he got it done when he was young?

"Can I ask you something inappropriate?" I say. "How old are you?"

Hadrian offers me his hand. When I give him my hand, he tucks my fingers into the crook of his elbow like we're a Victorian couple out for a promenade. We begin walking. I can see his house a quarter of a mile down the road.

"I'm about four hundred years old, give or take a decade."

I stumble, but Hadrian catches me before I fall. "So you're robbing the cradle here?"

"Well," he shrugs, "you are very mature for your age."

"When you said your family's been at the wine business for centuries, you really meant it."

Hadrian scoops me back into his arms and carries me, but he continues at a normal walking pace this time. "I was born on a vineyard. But I had other employment."

"The worse-than-mafia job."

"I worked for the church during the Spanish Inquisition."

"Whoa."

"Whoa, indeed."

"So you, like, tortured people?"

"Not like-tortured. Actual torture."

"And you liked it?" I hedge, trying to determine if my lover was conditioning me for a Red Room of Pain. Though I'm not so sure I am opposed to such a space.

"I was good at it," he says. "It was a way to eat."

I get the sense he didn't take his doubloons out for tapas back in ancient Spain. "You fed from your victims?"

"I did."

Hadrian looks straight ahead. There's a haze inside his green gaze. I can make out shame.

"Well," I say. "That's kinda smart. I mean, they were all bad guys right?"

He doesn't answer. I don't push. No more roller coaster rides for me today. But I am curious about other things.

"How did you become a vampire? Were you born this way?"

"I was turned. By the woman I thought I loved."

His voice is matter of fact, but I sense the hurt in his statement. I know I said no more rides, but what girl can resist knowing more about her guy's ex? Especially when it looks like said guy might bad mouth the ex.

"Domitia?" I hate the way her name tastes on my tongue. "You thought you loved her? You've changed your mind?"

"I have. What I felt for her, what was between us, I know now that that wasn't love."

Hadrian cradles me closer. I tighten the hold I have on his neck as he goes on.

"I thought love was pain. You've shown me just how wrong I was."

It's like I've popped all the balloons at one of those amusement park games with a dagger. Or made all the shots with a basketball at those impossible angles at a carnival. Or guessed the correct number of marbles in a jar at a county fair.

I should quit while I'm ahead. But, seriously? What girl would when she's getting the dirt on her predecessor?

"You said she was dead. How did she die?"

"We argued. And she walked into the sun."

And now it was game over and I'd struck out. I knew enough vampire lore to know that the sun was a contraindication of their condition. "She committed suicide?"

"She knew it would hurt me."

"That's cold blooded."

"She was. And she was right." The fog has moved from his eyes. They are clear as he regards me. "I've been feeling shame and guilt for two centuries for her actions. But no longer."

My hand slips from his neck to his chest. "I've been feeling shame and guilt for months because of my dad."

"It's not the same. Your father loved you. He would've given his life for yours. Domitia was just spiteful. She was the cause of her own death, not me. You were not the cause of your father's death. Or the accident back there."

My hand falls away from his heart. It comes to rest on my hip where the wound from the crash had been just moments ago. It's healed now.

"Are you going to tell me it was Fate or God?" I say.

"No," Hadrian says. "I won't tell you that."

He walks a bit in silence. I rest quietly in his arms. There's dried blood on his bare chest. My dress is in tatters. We look like we came from a war. And we have.

"So, what do we do now?" I ask.

"I've sent someone to take care of the car. The sun will be up soon. We need to get inside."

"So you can get some rest?"

"No. So that I can fuck you like I promised I would."

"Oh." Should I say no? I'd nearly died back there. But that was my normal everyday life. "Wait? Are you asking me? Or are you making demands?"

"No." Hadrian looks down at me. "I'm begging for it. Please, Cari. Please will you spread your thighs for me. Please let me fill you to the hilt with my cock and give you everything I have until you are trembling and can take no more. And then I'll give you just a bit more. Please."

Well, then. "Sure. Okay."

"Good girl," he purrs.

The rumble in his throat vibrates through me, like the toy he'd used on me earlier that night. Am I even capable of more orgasms? Stupid question. I'm ready to come from just those two words.

"By the Fates," said Gaius. "What happened?"

I hadn't even noticed we'd come into the house. Gaius stands in a silk robe and bare feet, like he's just ready for bed at five in the morning. I note that on his chest is the same tattoo as Hadrian's.

Viri stands barefoot as well. A toga is wrapped around his torso. On his bare chest is the familiar tattoo. In his hand is a blood bag.

"Just a little accident," says Hadrian. "We're fine. We're going to make love now."

"Did she stake you?" asks Viri, his gaze on the dried blood around Hadrian's chest.

"Yes. She did," says Hadrian. "Right in the heart."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

*H*adrian

VAMPIRES TAKE to resting because we can't be out in the sun. Because of the burning and death consequences. Repercussions that no longer interest me.

I peel the tattered dress from Cari's body. There are a few cuts and bruises along her cheek and arms. I bite my tongue. As I kiss each wound I allow drops of my blood to cover her flesh, healing her as I make love to her.

This is my first time making love. For far too long my hands have been instruments of pain. Not tonight. Not ever with her.

I enter her slowly, pausing after each inch I gain into her sweet heat. Cari is eager, greedy to be fully introduced to my cock. I pin her arms down over her head. Though I'll never hurt her, I still need to dominate her.

Her body tenses when I finally give her what she wants. My hips grind into her pelvis. My balls rest against her ass. The fine hairs covering her mons tickle the skin of my lower belly. I own every inch of this woman, yet I want more.

I begin to rock into her. It doesn't take long to realize that I have no hope of lasting long. But that's fine. We have the rest of her life.

I don't sleep a wink after making love with Cari. My body feels more alive than when I actually was alive. I revel in it as I gaze down at her sleeping form.

She says I make her feel warm.

Running my hands over her flesh, my fingertips feel singed. Pulling her back to my chest, my heart burns. Throwing my leg over hers and running my toes over her smooth calves, my loins reignite.

I don't press my need for her. She sleeps like the dead in my arms. I have a moment of panic realizing that one day she will grow old and die.

That's fine. Old age doesn't scare me or turn me off. I refuse to have her die young. She will live a full life under my watchful eye.

Her human body is so fragile. If her bones break there is no guarantee they'll heal. If her flesh tears, there might be a time when I can't knit it back together.

The thought of losing her turns me cold.

She is mine to protect until she grows old and dies. And when she does, I will go with her. There will truly be nothing left for me here in a world without Carignan.

She stirs and I pull her closer, not liking the few inches her body moves from mine as she stretches her limbs.

"Good morning," she says.

"It's nearing dusk."

The room is cast in darkness from the blackout blinds. There is a small fire burning in the hearth. Because I like to watch the flicker of the flames dance on Cari's skin.

"I slept the day away again. Am I ever going to see the sun with you?"

Not likely. If I can't go out into the sun, neither can she. I need to be by her to protect her at all times. Not only does she attract accidents, she has a proclivity to seek danger

out. And there still is that matter of her brother trying to kill her.

"I'm sorry," she says. "Was that insensitive, since you can't, you know? Do you miss it?"

"The sun?"

"Yeah, you haven't seen it in like four hundred years."

I don't tell her that I've fought a losing battle with the sun's rays for two centuries. I don't want her to think I'm crazy. And I don't want to bring up my ex again. Not when I've become reacquainted with joy and happiness for the first time in centuries.

"Do you want to bite me?" she asks.

I give my head a shake. I run my tongue over my fangs. They are not out. "No."

"Oh."

Is that disappointment I hear in her tone? "Do you want me to bite you?"

"I just figured you'd want to, or need to. But I suppose you have those blood bags."

I chuckle as I nuzzle her neck, right over the jugular. "Trust me, a blood bag is no substitute for your taste."

She jerks away. Her hand comes to her neck. "You've bitten me?"

"Only a sip."

She runs her fingers over both sides of her neck and her collarbone and comes up empty. "Where?"

I trace my hand from her breast, over her belly. She gasps when I nudge her thighs apart. I feel for the raised marks at the crease of her thighs. Her lips form a rounded O.

"What do I taste like?" she asks.

My grin is slow. "Warm honey mixed with cinnamon."

"Really?" Her eyes are bright as she preens. "You tasted spicy."

I chuckle at her description. I've never shared my blood with anyone. And I never will. All that I am is for this

woman.

"Do you need any more?" she asks.

"I need all of you," I say as I take her lips.

"Are you going to turn me?"

"No. Never. I told you, I will spend the rest of my life with you. When your life is over, I'm coming with you."

"What if I want to be like you?" she asks.

I pull away from her, my face hardens. "You don't. I won't. I won't turn you into a monster."

Her hand comes to my cheek. "You're not a monster."

I close my eyes and turn my face into her hand. I do not want to have this conversation anymore. Thankfully, she seems to sense that and changes the subject.

She scoots away from me and heads towards the door leading to her closets. Her walk is sure, like she owns the place. Good. I want her to feel at home here since this is where she will reside from now on.

"Can you look at pictures and paintings of the sun?" she asks.

"Yes, of course."

She feels on the wall and finds the light switch. The closet fills with fluorescence. But she is my sun. Like a moth to a flame, I follow her.

"I'll take a picture when I'm out today," she says. "The sunset over the Durand vineyard is the most beautiful. I want you to see it."

"Out?"

"I have to meet my brother and sister to sign some paperwork."

My first response is *the hell you will*. But I've matured, evolved. "I'll come with you."

"The meeting is at five. The sun won't be down yet. And you don't have to come."

She slips on another sundress, white this time. All of her wounds are healed. Her skin is perfect against the color of innocence, an innocence that I've claimed as my own.

"Tell them to change the time," I say.

Her back straightens as she buttons up the dress. But not in the sexy way of a submissive who has been put in her place. It's in the way of a fierce woman who has her hackles up. I brace myself for a fight that she will lose. But her gaze softens and her hand cups my chin. Now I am putty in her hands.

"This is about last night," she says. "The accident?"

How can I tell her it's about her whole life and that I need her to spend every moment of it with me as her protector, her pleasurer?

"It's just down the road. There isn't much traffic. If it'll make you feel better, I'll call my brother to pick me up. He's an excellent driver. He's never had so much as a fender bender."

"The hell you will," I growl. "Over my dead body will he come near you."

Her hand jerks away as if I'd burned her. "You still think he's tried to hurt me? Hadrian, that's ridiculous. Arneis loves me. He helped raise me."

"He's behind the raid of the club. And then we find ourselves run off the road and wrapped around a tree not long after."

"That was an accident."

She steps around me and heads back for the bedroom. The fire is dying. Carignan disappears into the darkness. But I see her just fine.

"Accidents and mishaps follow you. You're not leaving my sight."

"You don't own me, Hadrian," she says as she steps into a pair of flats.

"Perhaps you forgot our earlier conversation. You are mine."

"Sure." She comes to stand toe to toe with me. "Here in the bedroom. It's sexy here. It's not cute in any other room. And I'm leaving this room."

She takes a step to the door that leads out into the backyard, but I am on her in less than a second. She balls her hands into fists and puffs out her cheeks. It would be adorable under different circumstances.

"Hadrian, move out of my way."

"No. I can't."

Her entire body deflates. Her cheeks hollow. Her fingers hang limp at her sides. "Don't make me choose between you and my family."

The stake is back at the crash site. Yet somehow it pierces my chest all the way through. Why was I never enough? Domitia had always needed other lovers. And now Cari wants to run to her family instead of staying with me.

"I love you," she says. Her tone is a plea. It feels like a knife twisting in my heart.

Yes, this is familiar. The pain of love. The sharp needles in my chest. The inability to take a full breath.

"But you can't hold me captive."

If you live long enough, history will repeat itself. Cari's words are Domitia's last words to me down to the last syllable.

There was nothing I could do to hold onto Domitia. She made the decision to walk into the sun.

Cari doesn't go to the exit that leads to the hall. She goes to the exit from the first time she came into this room. The one that leads outside to the sun.

"Step back," she says.

I stand still. I can't move. My limbs no longer work. My heart stops beating.

"Hadrian, I don't want to hurt you."

She can't hurt me. Not when she's killed me. She's chosen others over me. Her hand on the door knob confirms it.

"I'll call you later and we'll talk."

She pulls the door open, but only a fraction. The sun is low, nearly swallowed up by the mountains. Still, a soft ray

of sunlight breaks into the darkness breaching my safe place. Cari steps through the crack of the door. I am powerless to stop her. For the second time in my life, I watch as the woman I love walks into the rays.

CHAPTER THIRTY

*E*_{ari}

I'M NOT sure if I'm happy or disappointed that Hadrian doesn't follow me out of the bedroom. I suppose he can't since the setting sun shines its muted light on my face.

But he doesn't shout after me either. He doesn't call my name. He doesn't move.

Part of me is worried I really hurt him by leaving. But this is not how I am going to live my life. He can own my heart, he can be the master of my body, but he can't control me. I've finally taken the reins of my life back from fate and I'm captaining this ship. He'll have to get used to that.

We can talk it out later tonight when I'm done with family business. Because that's what I do now. I talk my problems out instead of jumping out of an airplane to deal with them.

See, grown.

I'm standing at the end of the drive when Arneis pulls up less than ten minutes after I call him. He does not look pleased as I climb into the passenger seat of his sensible town car. I pull the seatbelt strap over my torso and buckle up like a responsible adult.

See, grown.

"Really, Cari?" Arneis starts right in. For most of my life, he hasn't had to pull the big brother-bad cop card. Because I've been a saint.

Up until last year.

But my brother isn't tugging me out of a club at four in the morning... because he missed me at Club Toxic. Well, he's not tugging me out of a plane or scooping me from a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean. I'm just leaving my boyfriend's house after a night of passion... and a couple of near death experiences.

"How long have you known this guy?"

"Two?" I rewind the clock in my head. "No, three days."

"You were raised better than this, to sleep around with a man, and a man like that."

My foot presses into the floor of the car, as if I can hit the brakes. "A man like what, Arneis?"

Arneis purses his lips, like he's trying to hold something in. But he's never been good at keeping secrets or keeping silent. "Do you know the type of people he's associated with? The lowest of creatures."

"Like Lucius Frangelico at Club Toxic?"

Arneis' jaw tenses. I can hear him grinding his molars. His fingers are white as they grip the steering wheel. His lips purse once more, but this time he holds his tongue.

"Did you have anything to do with the raid last night?" I ask.

"What do you know about that?"

I try to swallow the lump in my throat before I go on. But the obstruction is cold, thick, and somehow it burns.

"I was there," I manage to say. "It was you, wasn't it?"

Oh god. Could Hadrian have been right? Could my brother be trying to kill me?

"You don't understand," says Arneis.

He pulls over to the side of the road. The sun has nearly set. In just a few moments it will be dark.

My world is upside down as I look at my big brother. Arneis taught me to ride a bike. He drove me and my friends to the mall in middle school. He came to every one of my high school soccer games even though I sat on the bench for over half of the games.

"There were a lot of debts with the vineyard. Dad owed people, not all of them nice. I've been doing my best to pay for things so you and Mare wouldn't know. The only way to keep it all going was to start the political bribes again. I didn't want to. But I had no choice until we sold the vineyard. Then I'd be able to clear all the debt."

My brain is so preoccupied with redrawing the past with my brother as a villain that I don't hear the words that exonerate him. It takes me a moment to replay his confession. When I do, I see that there is a threat. But it's not to me.

"So you extorted people like Frangelico?" I ask.

Shame shines through Arneis' eyes. It's easy to identify because I know it so well.

Here I thought I was the only one suffering after Papa's death. But Mare was struggling alone in the vineyard. And now I learn Arneis has been struggling over the books. Meanwhile, I've been playing fast and loose with my life.

"I never thought I'd be that kind of politician, that kind of man. But these are bad people. I'm not going to seek reelection, if this is what I have to do. I'll come back to the vineyard. We'll make it work. Papa would've wanted it that way."

I sigh. I didn't realize I've been holding my breath. "You had nothing to do with the failed parachute or the cut harness or last night's accident."

"What are you talking about?" He looks me over. "You were in an accident?"

"I'm fine. Everything's fine. Could you drive me back to Hadrian's? I just need to tell him something real quick."

Arneis glances at his watch. "We'll be late and..."

I don't hear anything else he says. A dark figure appears in front of the car out of nowhere. It's a woman. She has the palest skin and whitest hair. Her whiteness is stark in the dusk of night. She smiles and that's when I see the fangs.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

*H*adrian

THE INVADERS HAVE RETREATED beyond the horizon. I remain holed up inside. My boundaries have been breached. My defenses are down. The scene inside the walls of what was once my safe haven is that of a massacre as the white sheet from the bed slips onto the floor; a sign of surrender.

Darkness steals into the room. Not the dark of night. This is an empty darkness, devoid of moonlight, devoid of any essence. I know then that I must still retain my soul because my entire being feels plunged into a murky depth.

Cari is gone and I am hollow. A shell.

This is nothing like what I felt when Domitia died. That devastation was a stroll on a deserted highway. This feels as though I've been tossed over and into a raging sea during a hurricane.

I lost the power in my legs long ago. My bare ass sits on the cold floor. My head hangs down. My gaze remains fastened to my empty hands.

But only for a second.

Suddenly my hands are filled with wood and plaster. Blood trickles from my nail beds down my wrists. I look up to see that the wall in my bedroom now has a gaping hole in it, one the size of the hollow space in my chest now that she is gone.

I'm not sure when, but soon I'm no longer alone. The company to my misery is not welcome. I neither say nor do anything to usher it away.

"I heard doors opening before dusk settled," says Gaius. He is sitting beside me. Where his legs are covered in fine silk, mine are bare. His hands are clasped together in his lap, as though he plans to sit for a long while. "For a moment I assumed it was you on your daily rampage with the morning star. But with the new love in your life, I doubted you were still facing off against the sun."

I don't answer. I stare into the darkness. I can see everything, but I focus on nothing.

"She didn't slam doors as she left," Gaius continues. "Normally I would take that as a good sign when a woman leaves my bed. But then I come to find you here, butt ass naked on the floor, sitting in front of your patio door."

I lift my head, but not to look at Gaius. I bang it once, twice, three times against the wall. When I let my head come to rest there is a hole in the wall that cradles me.

Gaius nods his head as though that is my answer to the question he still hasn't asked. He still doesn't ask. He continues to deduce.

"For the brief moment that I met her, Cari didn't seem to me the theatrical sort. I didn't get the impression that she was emotionally abusive and would manipulate you like Domitia."

"Manipulate me?" I turn my head to face Gaius.

The male's robe is open and his chest is revealed. Over his left pec is an embroidered cross with a sword and a reef; a symbol of the Spanish Inquisition. I have the same marking, as does Viri. We are three males who have been

dealt more than our fair share of misery in this world. No matter how much we try to turn our lives around and move away from pain, it always seems to follow us.

"Domitia slammed doors," says Gaius. "She broke furniture and dishes when you didn't give her her way. And sometimes even when you did. She liked the drama. She reveled in the pain. Your pain especially, because you were her shining knight."

Now I turn my body to face my friend. There was never any love between Domitia and Gaius. She liked his cock. He was her sired. Behind closed doors, Gaius always made it plain to me that there were no tender feelings for the woman I loved. Only devotion and gratitude for the new life she'd given him. But he never disparaged her.

He encouraged me to move on over the centuries. To find someone new. But he never spoke ill of the love she and I shared.

"Domitia needed to keep poking at you to get what she needed. Harder and harder each time. That's why she always came back to you, you know. You gave her what she needed most." He looks me square in the eye as he drops a grenade on my vision on the past. "Misery."

"Domitia loved me," I insist. But my pronouncement isn't as vehement as it would've been a few days ago.

"I don't doubt that. But it was a sick kind of love, Hadrian. Surely, you can see that now. She'd break your heart and disappear for years. I swear you are the first case of Stockholm Syndrome."

I turn back to the door where Carignan left me. I don't want to hear any more about Domitia. Her pale skin and white-blond hair are a distant memory. What's in its place now is Carignan's sun-kissed skin and spirited gaze. I won't be forgetting her face anytime soon.

"Sometimes I feel a cold breeze and I wonder if she's still here," says Gaius. "But that's impossible. You saw her walk into the sun."

It's Carignan's body I see walk into the sun now. Only she didn't scream as the rays touched her. She didn't disappear as soon as she walked out.

"You did see her go?"

I turn and glare at Gaius. "You see that I am down, on the ground, on my ass. And you're going to kick me?"

Gaius flattens his lips. "What happened between you two?"

"We argued and she walked into the sun."

"Are we talking about you and Domitia? Or you and Cari?"

I bang my head against the wall again, but the impact isn't the same now that there's a hole there. Plaster crumbles down around my shoulders.

"You need to go after Carignan," says Gaius.

"She left." I motion to the closed door.

"But she didn't slam the door. Cari's human. She can walk into the sun without burning to a crisp. The sun is down now. What are you waiting for?"

"She didn't choose me." My empty hands ball into fists. I bang them against my legs. "She wants to be with others."

"There's another man?" Gaius runs a hand through his hair and then tugs at his lower lip. "She didn't seem like the type. But I guess you never know to look at them. And they say it's always the good girls you need to watch out for."

"No, not another man. Her family; her brother and her sister."

Gaius opens his mouth. Then closes it. Then tries again. "She went home to her family and you're having a meltdown?"

My patience has gone. Gaius can see it in my eyes because he holds up his hands as though to ward off an impending attack.

"Hadrian, they're her family. You don't need to compete with them. The love of a family is different than the love between a man and a woman. I can't believe we're having

this conversation. There needs to be a vampire birds and bees talk."

"I told her not to go," I insist.

"What if she told you to choose between her and us?"

"I don't understand the question."

"Wow. Okay. Kick in the nuts for the bromance. But you can have Carignan, and her family, and your family too. You bring us all together to be one big happy, dysfunctional family."

Maybe. Could I have overreacted? She did say she would call me later, and she's never gone back on her word in the three days that I've known her.

But there's still my suspicions of her brother. Cari was so sure Arneis would never hurt her, but I've seen too many humans turn on one another to not be cautious.

"Are we having an orgy?" Viri stands in the door in a pair of swim trunks and combat boots. He holds a blood bag in one hand and a phone in the other.

"You missed it," says Gaius. "We're done."

"So, Carignan's the type to like the double-tap?"

I sigh, but I'm too weary to correct Viri. Gaius snorts his laughter. Viri does not sound excited about the prospect.

Like me, Viri isn't fond of sharing women. Not even when Domitia liked to share him with other women. She'd always brag about the size of Viri's member. Donkey Man, she used to call him and put him on display for other females. Sometimes she put his wares on sale when she needed cash quick.

"You what?" The shrill voice comes from the phone in Viri's hand. "What have you done with my sister? I will call the cops. I will call the FBI."

Viri holds the phone out in front of him. The screeching voice amplifies, as do the threats. "Someone called Mary is on the telephone for Carignan."

I scramble to my feet and grab the phone from Viri. "Marechal," I say calmly into the phone. "That was a

misunderstanding.”

“Just guys being guys,” Gaius offers unhelpfully.

“I defended you to Arneis,” Marechal is shouting. “He told me you were bad. And now-”

“No one has touched Cari but me,” I say. “No one ever will. You can ask her yourself.”

And then Marechal says the only thing that scares me more than the sun.

“She’s not here. She’s more than an hour late. So is Arneis. Neither of them are answering their phones.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

*E*ari

I AM BOUND. My hands are tied behind my back. The ropes bite into my flesh, coming away with pieces of my skin. The metallic smell of my blood is in the air.

I open my eyes but all is dark, save a sliver of light. No, not light. It shimmers in a way that light cannot.

The shimmer comes closer. It moves like waves, but it's not liquid. It's hair.

My mind reels back. The car. The woman on the road. Her pale skin and even paler hair. That's her.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"Don't act as though he hasn't talked about me," she says. Her voice is heavily accented. Spanish? No, she doesn't roll her R's. She barely sounds out her consonants. The English language on her tongue sounds clunky, untried, like she's come out of the Dark Ages and this is the first time she's ever spoken it.

I try to focus on what she's saying to me. She thinks I've been talking about her with somebody. "Who?"

My face is slammed to the side. The force is so strong, my whole body tries to turn. But my torso doesn't get far

because of the binds.

I have experienced whiplash many times in my life. From braking hard and sudden in a speeding car. To the jerk and pull of the harness when I jump out of a plane. But I have never once in my life been slapped.

Long after the shock of the deed processes through my brain, long after the distress of the pain along my cheek, nose, and chin subsides, the ringing continues in my ear. The roaring echo acts like a silencer, or one of those sound canceling headphones that plays white noise while others around chat away. But it's like someone turns the volume down on the ringing in my ear because the shouting in the cafe breaks through.

"You are a home-wrecker," the white-haired woman screams at me. "Do you know what they did to whores like you in my time, women who lay with another's husband?"

Home wrecker? Husband? Her time?

It's hard for my brain to process what's happening. Too many new experiences are happening to me. I've been kidnapped, for real this time. I've been bound, and not in the good way. I've been assaulted physically, and now verbally.

"Well, nothing would happen to the man," she says in her heavy accent, which is hard to make out as she babbles. "But did you know the authorities would allow a husband who believed he was wronged to kill his wife?"

Wherever this chick is from, they are a backward culture. I'm hoping, wishing, and praying that she goes back there now and leaves me alone. I haven't touched her husband. I have only been with one man in my life.

The prickles of awareness start up my spine. Impossibility is dawning on me, along with her identity.

"Since he thinks I'm already dead, I suppose there is no problem with me killing you."

My entire body goes numb at her threat. Because I don't think it's a threat. I'm certain it's a promise.

"Domitia," I say. "You're Domitia."

When I was a girl, I got nightmares after watching *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. There's a scene in that movie when the Grinch is hatching his plan to steal all the presents from Whoville. As his heartless idea comes into focus, he smiles. The smile stretches across his face, all the way up to his eyes. His eyes squint upwards, along with his brows. And his ears curl into what look like horns. To this day the memory of the Grinch smiling makes me shudder.

That's how Domitia looks at me now.

"So he has spoken of me to you," she says through her grinchy grin.

Before I can answer, the room is flooded with lights. The bright light blinds me and I blink to adjust my vision. When I open my eyes again, Domitia is no longer there.

A second later I know that I'm wrong. She makes her presence known when I feel the binds pull.

The skin where I am cuffed tears. My joints protest and then give in. At the first pop of bone from joint, I scream.

Hadrian said she liked to see people in pain. He also said she was dead. Maybe I'm dead? Maybe I'm in hell and this is my punishment?

"I was so certain he loved me so much that he'd walk into the sun for me. But he didn't," Domitia says as she rounds me. "I was very close to forgiving him when you ruined it all."

I know I should lift my head, to see where my enemy is. But I can't. The pain is too much. Terror fills me when I realize she's just getting started.

"He's been in such pain," she says. "Such perfect agony for centuries."

Even through my whimpering, I make out the madness in her voice. She says the words as though they bring her ecstasy. Like she is getting high off of simply knowing that Hadrian was suffering.

This bitch is crazy. How had Hadrian ever loved her?

"Decades upon decades of shame and guilt, all my hard work, now all gone because of you."

"You say you love him? That's not love. Pain is not love."

Domitia laughs. The sound hurts my ears. But not as much as the cane she takes to my back.

I can't bow my back to relieve any of the agony. The small inch that I move to absorb her strike sends even more pain through my dislocated bones.

"You childish human. You have no idea what love is. You have no idea what pain is. You play with your life, falling from the sky, walking up in the sky. You want to die."

The sick realization grasps hold of me. "You, you cut my harness. You ran us off the road last night."

"Of course I did." Domitia digs her nails into my scalp and wrenches my hair back. Her eyes are lifeless. Her fangs glisten in the overhead lights. "Is no one paying attention to me?"

"But Hadrian," I say. "Hadrian was in that car. He nearly died."

She tsks, making an annoyed sound, and then shoves my head down. "He's immortal, you imbecile."

"He was nearly staked alive."

She brushes the notion away with her hand. "I would stake him for fun all the time when we were together. And we will be together again. Your death will crush him, and then he'll come back into my arms, more miserable than when I left him."

My death? I feel the adrenaline rush through me. But I am not up high ready to jump. I am not bound by Hadrian awaiting the pleasure he brings.

This is a harness I can not get out of. This is a plane that's not going my way. This is a plank walk that I will fall from.

"You're going to feel a lot of pain before I'm done," Domitia says, her voice pleasant in its promise. "You'll beg for death. I guarantee it."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

*H*adrian

I INHALE the night's air. The wind is punctuated with the smell of ripe grapes, chemicals, and manure. I ignore them all and focus on the singular scent that has turned my world right-side up.

The smell of Cari is strong in my nose. The taste of her is still on my lips. The only thing missing is the actual feel of her in my hands.

Letting her walk out that door earlier this evening was the biggest mistake of my life. Not because I thought she was walking into danger. Because I was too wrapped up in my past pain to hear what she was saying to me. What she was asking of me.

She wasn't trying to leave me. I understand that now.

I'm going to make a lot more mistakes in this relationship. It's inevitable, since my only prior relationship was with a homicidal maniac. There's going to be a lot of deprogramming in my future. But I need to find Cari first.

There's still the possibility that Arneis is trying to kill her. But that possibility grows smaller with each passing

moment.

Gaius is on the phone with Frangelico now. The vampire king tells us that Arneis was behind the raid last night. But the night before that, when Carignan was on her plank walk in the sky, Arneis had been in another meeting with Frangelico's human business partners all day. He couldn't have learned about the plank walk in time to sabotage it.

After I'm able to talk Marechal down from calling in the US Army to my home, she tells us that the night before, the night that Cari fell from the sky and into my arms, Marechal and Arneis were at home all day. They'd been arguing over the future of the vineyard while Cari was MIA. So once again, neither of them knew what Cari was up to, or had the time to interfere with her plans.

But I know that strap was cut before she was in the sky. I know there was no other vehicle last night, just a bright light. And now she and her brother are missing. When I find who's behind this, I will take them back to the dungeons of Spain and show them what I am truly capable of.

Gaius and I follow Cari's scent down the lane from our house. She didn't get far. Her essence is still in the air.

It doesn't matter where her captor took her, I will find her. I will track them down. Then I will torture him slowly, over days, over years. Bringing him back to life just so I can take his life even more slowly.

How could I have let her walk out this morning? After promising I'd go into the sun for her.

Just as I did with Domitia.

I've lived long enough that I should learn from my past. But I suppose I didn't learn any valuable lessons when I was with Domitia. I let her turn me inside out and call it love.

Cari crawled inside my barren heart cavity and became my heartbeat. The only pain I feel is the emptiness of not having her safe in my arms. Carignan taught me what love truly is. Or rather, I'm learning through her.

Love is actually caring about what the person thinks and feels. I'm not good at that outside of the bedroom. But I'll work hard to improve.

Love is putting someone else's happiness before my own. Again, another failing grade when I step outside the bedroom. But I'm willing to practice until perfection.

Love is trusting that when someone walks away it doesn't mean they're gone forever. This will be my hardest lesson. But I'll begin my mastery as soon as I have Carignan back in my arms.

I will find her. I will save her. And then I will shower her with my love.

Cari's scent grows stronger as we get further down the lane. In the distance, I spot a town car. The license plate is a government issue. Could that be Arneis' car?

It must be. I remember she called him for a ride. I can't see her, but I can smell her sweet scent in the air.

My pulse races as I speed up. Then I nearly trip over my feet with my next inhale. There's also the smell of blood in the air. Her blood.

The car is stopped on the side of the road. It is not damaged. There was no crash.

I push myself faster until I am at the car. There is a body slumped over in the front seat. I see a dark head and know that I am alive because my heart stops. The blood, her blood, that is in my veins goes cold.

But it isn't her.

It's a man. It's her brother. Arneis is alive, but only barely. Blood is coming from his neck. Then I see it; puncture wounds.

A vampire attack.

But who?

"Do you smell that?"

Gaius' voice sounds strange. It's tinged with fear. It's strange because Gaius is never afraid.

I inhale again. Then I smell it, too. Instead of desire, instead of passion, true terror crawls up my spine.

"Tell me I'm imagining this Hadrian," Gaius says. "Tell me it can't be her."

Shifters aren't the only paranormals who know scent. Vampires have enhanced senses of smell as well. There are smells you never forget. The smell of your mother. The smell of your favorite dish. The smell of your maker.

Domitia. The scent of her is clear, unmistakable, alive.

Her scent intermingles with Cari's. It's all over Arneis. The car is where Cari's scent ends.

Wherever they went they didn't walk. Or perhaps she blurred. Trying to follow the scent of a vampire moving at top speed is near impossible.

"How?" demands Gaius. "How could this be?"

"I don't know." My voice is barely a whisper.

"You said she walked into the sun."

"She did. I saw her."

"Are you sure? You saw her burn?"

No. I didn't see her burn. She stepped out. She screamed. And then she was gone.

I turned away. I didn't want to go. She told me if I loved her I'd walk into the sun with her. But I hesitated. And I've paid for my hesitation with guilt and shame for hundreds of years. Until...

"It's exactly the long, suffering game she loves to play with you."

She wouldn't. I don't say that out loud. It sounds juvenile just in my head.

She would. She did. Here was her scent on the side of my vineyard. My new love, my true love, Cari is gone. And I stand in more pain than I've ever withstood in my long life.

Inside the car, Arneis is coming to. His wounds are significant, but he'll live. I need him conscious now, so I take my wrist between my teeth and tear. I wrench his head back and force my blood into his mouth.

"Where is Cari?"

The man stares into my eyes. His brown gaze is so like his sister's. "A ghost. A white-haired ghost."

There's no more denying it. It's true. Domitia is alive and she has Cari.

"Where would she be?" Gaius asks me. "Where would she take her?"

"Somewhere I'll find them. She'll want me to see."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

*E*ari

PAIN.

All I feel is pain. Pain in every part of my body. Pain even outside of my body. It's in the air molecules pressing against my skin. It's in every inhale. It's in the dust mites that touch my lips, my fingertips, my hair.

I've stopped blinking and just keep my eyes closed. I can't stop twitching, the pain in my extremities won't let up. I want to stop breathing. I want to stop existing if that means the pain will end. But the moments stretch on.

Most of the time, the pain is constant. Like a flat line at the top of a mountain. And then it increases, taking me higher to a peak I never want to reach. But at the same time, I do want to reach it. Thinking that if I can just get past the next level, I can survive it.

Each time I reach the next summit, I am even more wrong than the last time. The pain spikes unbearably higher. The new flat line takes even longer to level out. At some point it never does.

There was a time I liked heights. A time I liked the adrenaline. But there is so much adrenaline in my blood

right now I'm sure I'm bleeding it out. All that I want now is to be drained dry. No more fight. No more flight. Just an end.

But it won't end.

Sharp teeth puncture my neck. They puncture my arms. They puncture my lower calves.

"You do taste sweet, I'll admit."

The vampire bite is not the orgasm Hadrian said it would be. There is a spark of pleasure at the first prick, but Domitia likes to chew her food.

It hurts.

Everything hurts.

Why is she hurting me?

"You are going to help me make him miserable," she says. Still in that thickly accented, pleasant tone. As if we were girlfriends talking about our Saturday night dates.

I know she's talking about Hadrian. I don't want to make Hadrian miserable. I want to make him happy. I love him.

I must say this out loud though I don't hear myself say it. There is only ringing in my ears. Ringing and her terrible voice.

"Love is pain," she shouts.

I wince, but that hurts. I try to shake my head, but the effort hurts. Even if I could, I know it won't accomplish anything.

"Happiness is a mirage. It never lasts. The only thing in life that does last is pain. You are brought into this world causing your mother pain. You are disappointed every day and sleep in pain. Pain is the truth."

No. What she's saying is a lie. I can see that much through all this pain she is inflicting.

Hadrian made me feel good. When he came into my life he brought pleasure. When I fell asleep in his arms I felt safe. His love, and my love for him, is the only truth I am certain of.

"You were trying to give my Hadrian a lie. But now I'm back. I'll take care of his heart and make him miserable again."

He isn't her Hadrian. He is my Hadrian. I want to fight for him. I need to fight for him. I need to fight for our love.

But how, when I hurt so much? How, when I am bound by this mad woman? How, when all I want to do is skip to the end I know she has planned for me?

I don't want to die. I want to live. I want to live with Hadrian. I need to live for him. I can't let her win.

There is another impact on my body. I'm not sure where. I'm not sure with what. The pain is instant and it radiates everywhere.

I think I scream. But I'm not sure. My ears still ring. My throat is so dry I feel like I've swallowed nails. All the pain she's delivered to me welcomes this next bout of pain. All the prickles and stings and bites are making friends. They're settling in to stay on my torn skin, inside the cracks of my bones. Great, come on in.

Domitia doesn't strike me again for a while. The pain rages on, but I reach a plateau. Breathing isn't entirely impossible in this tiny sliver of relief. Blinking still won't be possible, so I leave my eyes closed.

I know that we are moving. I feel the wind on my face. I smell the air, earth, berries.

I know the smell of these berries. They are old, and yet new. Berries from a far away land that are freshly planted in the Arizona soil. We are back at the vineyard. We are back at Hadrian's vineyard.

No. I have to fight. I have to warn him. I have to get away.

But I can't move a single limb. It feels as though everything in me is broken. Everything but my will and my heart.

I will not give in to her. I will not let her win.

My brain makes out a knocking sound. Followed by a gasp. It's a masculine gasp. I've never heard a man gasp in terror before.

"Let me in, Viri, darling."

"No." Viri's voice is a low whine, like a wounded animal.

"Let. Me. In." Domitia punctuates every word. "Or you'll be punished."

There's another masculine whine. I crack open one eye and see Viri sink to his knees. The big man is near tears. His gaze is full of sorrow as he glances at me, and then down. He nods his head and we move across the threshold.

I close my eyes again. The next time I come conscious I am surrounded by Hadrian's scent. I am in his room. I am in his bed.

Domitia placed me here, in this place where I realized I wanted to experience my life more than I wanted to lose my life. She has placed me here to die.

I know that I will. But I'm going to hold on for as long as it takes to see Hadrian, to let him know that he gave me back my life. To let him know what we had was love and I wouldn't want to have lived my life without knowing him. That I would do it all again if it meant that I would have his love, even just for the short time that I have.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

*H*adrian

I TEAR AT MY HAIR, pulling clumps from the roots. I clench my hands into fists until my nails begin to crack and bleed. I throw back my head and let out a cry that silences all creatures of the night.

I cannot find her.

I have looked everywhere. Her home. The airfield where she took her dives. The two buildings where she took her walk across the sky. Her family's vineyard where I had to confront Marechal. Luckily, Gaius was able to divert Marechal's homicidal attentions against me by depositing her injured brother into her care.

I am at the very end of my rope. I don't know where else to look. But I know Cari lives. I feel her inside me.

She is the beat of my heart. She is the pulse in my veins. She is my breath, and the very fact that I am still breathing, I know that she is still on this plane of existence.

I hear a phone ringing. It's not mine. Mine has remained silent for the last few hours that I've been searching for my heart.

Gaius pulls a device from his pocket and answers. I can hear the conversation from the other end. It's just two words. But those two words rock my world.

"She's here."

Gaius doesn't ask Viri which she. In this case, we both know his statement is plural. They are both there. Domitia has taken Cari back to my home.

Why hadn't I thought of that first? I claim to know the madwoman so well. But after three days with Cari, I see that I don't know my former lover at all.

No, I retract that title as I blur across the vineyard. Domitia was never my lover. She was my seducer first. She murdered the innocent youth that I was. Then she jailed my mind and caged my heart. I just didn't realize that she fed me on a daily diet of torture and not love.

Not five minutes later, I burst through the front door of my home to find Viri huddled in the corner. The cell phone is still in his ear. I realize now just how damaged she made my blood brother. How damaged she made us all.

Viri is too broken to believe he could be loved. Gaius, the only one of us who saw her clearly, is too jaded to ever consider love. Me? My vision, my mind is so twisted that I never knew what love was. But no longer.

"I called for help," says Viri.

"You did." I touch his shoulder briefly. "I'm here."

I leave him there. He'll survive. Cari needs all of my attention.

I follow Cari's scent to my bedroom. When I see her I nearly fall to my knees. My love, my heart, my soul, she is twisted as she lays on the bed.

Her body is bent. Her limbs hang loose. Her face is black and blue.

Murder is on my mind. Every torture technique I have ever learned springs into my vision. But I push it all aside when Cari opens her eyes and finds my gaze.

I am on her. I am with her. I would take her pain if I could. Once again in less than twenty-four hours, I tear into my wrist and place my blood to her lips.

Her lips are cracked, broken, bleeding. She tries to open her mouth, but I can see that that even small motion pains her. Death will not be good enough for Domitia.

"Oh, this is all so touching. Like a sappy movie on that channel that does the silly holiday cards."

The voice is from my nightmares. I struggle with turning to face Domitia and staying with Cari. If Carignan doesn't make it, I need for my face to be the last thing that she sees. I need for my declaration of love to be the last thing she hears. I need for my kiss to be on her lips before she takes her last breath.

"She's going to die," says Domitia. "I made sure it'll be slow and painful so that we can both watch."

I whip around to her at those words. There she stands. She is as thin and pale as a wraith. She's dressed in black, which sets her porcelain skin in stark relief. Though she's in dark clothing I see the dark spots of Cari's blood all over her gown.

"I even popped corn," she says. "A wondrous invention for watching entertainment. Want some?"

Her thin fingers offer me a handful of the fluffy treat. "I'm going to kill you."

"Again?" She grins. "The pain, the shame of my death kept you alive all this time. And you've made something of yourself. I keep Serrano wines in my cellar, truly delicious work. You three should be thanking me for all your success."

Thanking her?

"Though that's not the reason I did it," she continues. "I always intended to come back to you, darling. I always imagined the joy you'd feel after decades of thinking I was dead. All that pain bottled up for a big release." Her face transforms as her gaze finds Cari. "And she ruined it."

I place myself in Domitia's line of sight to block her view of Cari. Her gaze flicks back to me. I note, for the first time in hundreds of years, that her eyes are vacant black holes. How had I thought love shone through those void orbs?

"I burned for you," she says. She blinks and waggles her head, popcorn spills from her hands as she confesses. "Not to a crisp, obviously. I drank a witch's potion to step into the sun. It only lasted for a moment. I did get a touch crusty on the edges though. I was curious what the burn would feel like. It was quite rousing. I had one of my human slaves toss a cloak over me after I dropped from your sightline. It took me an entire week to heal."

I am lightheaded at her revelations. Not only did she fake her death, but she's also been watching me all these years. Taking joy in my pain.

Gaius was right. It's not just her who's sick, I am a complete invalid. I never saw what a lie she was. Now I do. And I am also healed. The scales have fallen from my eyes and I see this creature for who and what she truly is.

"At first I was quite heartbroken that you didn't follow me out into the sun. But as I watched you burn on a daily basis for me, I knew that you truly loved me. It was so touching. I'd planned to come back to you a couple of months later, but when I saw how you grieved, it filled me with such love for you."

She says that four letter word and my stomach clenches. My chest hardens. My throat itches with bile.

"I loved watching you in pain over my death. But I always planned to come back to you. I've checked on you over the decades. Each time I saw that you still grieved it made me so aroused. But now we can be together again, at last."

Domitia tosses more popped corn in her mouth. Much of it falls to the floor. I note the red stains on her hands, Cari's blood.

My vision goes red. But for some reason, my hands aren't on her neck. For some reason, I am not tearing her limb from limb.

"Hadrian," Cari whispers.

I turn away from Domitia. My heart flushes of its hatred of her the moment my back is to her. My mind is no longer on her. With the sight of my true love in my eyes, I am filled with nothing but love.

Carignan lifts her mangled hand. I am on my knees, helping her bring her fingers to my face. I kiss each of her bruised knuckles gently.

"You saved my life," says Cari.

"You saved mine," I say. "You showed me what love truly is."

"I did," she agrees. She tries to grin but instead grimaces in pain.

Anger and rage push against the love I feel for her. My fingers want to rip something, someone apart.

"Don't walk into the sun tomorrow," says Cari. "I want you to live for me. Will you do that?"

"No, he won't," says Domitia. "He'll live for me because I know what he needs to keep him alive. He needs the pain. He craves it. Don't you, darling? Right now, you feel the life coursing through your dead veins as you watch her die."

I don't turn to Domitia. At the moment, I feel nothing for her. Not even hatred. She is no longer a factor. I keep my gaze trained on what's important.

Cari.

More than anything I am determined that she will not die. If I am going to live, then so will she.

A shadow moves in the dark hall. Domitia is too engrossed in the tragedy she's created to notice. I'm too preoccupied with love and my new life's mission to care.

I tear open my shirt. I slice my nails through my chest. On the left side where my heart beats.

I lift Cari's head to my chest. She is unresponsive now. Still, I coax her to drink from me, to take everything I have in my heart.

From behind me, I hear Domitia gasp. There's not much that's ever frightened a woman who gets off on pain. Except the possibility of losing some of her power.

"Hello, dear," says Frangelico in his smooth, unhurried voice.

"Oh, Lucius, darling," Domitia's voice is wobbly with false certainty. "What a pleasant surprise."

"I got a call from your Virius," says Frangelico. "He told me you were in town."

"Really? I'll need to have a talk with my little Donkey Man."

"Let's you and I chat first. You are in my territory, after all."

The sounds of battle that rage behind me do not sound pleasant. I ignore it as I focus all of my attention on Cari and getting her to drink. I would hate to defy her last wishes, but I will. If she doesn't wake a vampire in the morning, then I will face the sun.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

*E*ari

AT LEAST DEATH IS WARM. I expected it to be cold with no blood running through my veins any longer. But my fingers aren't numb. My legs are stiff. I feel... good.

Well, my body feels good. It's my heart that's broken. I can't open my eyes, not when I know that I will never see Hadrian again.

I wonder if the warmth and toastiness I'm feeling is because I've landed in Hell. That wouldn't be fair since I didn't cause my death. I was murdered. I figure I should get a pass. Then I can see my parents.

But I note that the temperature of the room isn't warm. It's comfortable. It's just my skin that's snug.

No, wait. That's not my skin. It feels more like a blanket. Like a warm comforter stretched along my body and tucked in at the edges.

Hunh? Maybe this is heaven. I'm sure the devil wouldn't take this type of care of one of his new inhabitants.

If this is heaven, the air quality is pretty poor. I try to inhale. But I can barely take in a breath.

My lungs aren't working correctly. No, they don't seem to be working at all. I can breathe, but the air coming into my body feels hollow. Almost unnecessary.

My stomach feels empty and I have no urge to fill it. Almost as if I don't have need of food any longer.

Lying down feels good. But I'm not tired. Definitely not sleepy. I feel like I could run a mile. And for some reason I'm sure I could do it in less than a minute.

I hear a voice call my name. Immediately, I grimace. I know it's Hadrian. So why am I mad?

I told him not to follow me in death. But did I really expect him to listen? He is so determined to be the boss of me. I suppose now I have to let him be. I have no idea what to do in death. I just hope we can still have sex.

"Carignan."

His voice is soft, like a whispered prayer. Any irritation I felt melts away. I know it's sick, but I'm happy he followed me to the other side. A famous man once said that death could not part true love. That all it could do was delay it for a little while.

Hadrian didn't waste a moment to be with me in the next life. It's romantic. It's not stalking at all.

I turn my head to the sound of my name. It's not Hadrian that I see. It's not his deep voice. It's deep, but there is no accent.

"Carignan," the man says again.

He's tall with gray hair. He has a big, barrel chest and a smile that makes me feel like a kid on Christmas morning.

"Papa?"

My dad is standing in front of me. There is light around him. He is whole, and healed, and healthy. He's not bleeding. His eyes are open. So are his arms.

I run to him. I jump into his arms like I am a kid again. He folds me into his arms like I am still his little girl.

"Papa, I'm so sorry," I say. "I died. I didn't mean to this time. I tried to live. I fought so hard to live."

My father smiles down at me. He lifts his hand to my face. This time it reaches my cheek. I feel the soft brush of his fingertips below my eyes as he brushes a tear away.

Behind my father, I see a woman come into view. She has brown hair like mine, and brown eyes. It's been so long since I've seen her that it takes me a moment to recognize her.

"Maman?"

She doesn't touch me. She rests her head on my father's shoulder and simply smiles at me. The same love that warms me from my father's eyes shines from hers.

"Go," says my father. "Get out and live."

"What?"

It's the same words he said to me before he died. Why does he say them now when I am dead?

Before I can ask him, he slips from my grasp. He moves away from me, walking into the bright light with my mother on his arm. Even though they're retreating I can still feel them with me. In my heart.

"Carignan?"

This voice I know is Hadrian's. I turn around, but I don't see him. Just darkness. It's then I realize that my eyes are still closed.

I open them.

I see the dark, blackout blinds of Hadrian's room. The only light is the fire burning in the hearth. I'm lying down on his bed. All around me I smell the spicy scent of him. I can taste it on my tongue. I can feel it in my blood.

A memory flashes through my mind. It's of me and Hadrian. He has me locked in a tight embrace. My face is at his chest. My mouth is on his heart, taking in the blood directly from that organ.

I did die. But Hadrian didn't. He brought me back to life.

"There you are," he says as he brushes my hair away from my temple.

His touch before this moment always made me heated. It's an inferno now. My senses reach a height beyond 18,000 feet. I can feel the grooves of his fingerprints. I make out each of the unique lines that belong only to him. I can now tell his touch from anyone else's.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey."

"I'm not dead." It's all I can manage when so much is running through my head.

"That fact is debatable."

"I'm a vampire."

"I had to." His strong voice is a wary plea. "I had to try and save your life. You made me want to live. I didn't want to do it without you."

The wariness invades his features. He's waiting for my reaction. Will I rage at him for turning me into what he is? Or will I thank him for bringing me back to him.

I sit up. I'm naked beneath the sheets. Perfect. It'll save time for what I have planned.

Hadrian ignores my naked chest. His gaze is still intent on my face, like he's still waiting for my reaction to what he's done, what he's turned me into.

"You brought me back to life," I say, "Back to you."

His eyes close. His sigh is heavy with relief.

I look down at my hands. The last thing I remember when I was awake was pain. Nothing but pain. And then his face. I clung to the sight of him until I couldn't hold my eyes open any longer.

"Where is she?" I ask. I don't want to speak her name. Luckily, I don't need to clarify.

"Gone."

"Gone-gone?" I ask.

He nods.

I don't ask for any elaboration. There's only one thing that I care about. "So your heart is all mine now."

I reach out to him, placing my hand over the tattoo on his heart, the one that marked him as the Prince of Pain. I want to etch over it with a mark of my own.

"I am all yours now. My body, my soul, and my heart."

"Yeah? *Sii uno ragazzo bravo*. Show me."

He grins at my words. He comes to his knees on the bed. He doesn't need to lord his power over me. He has my total devotion, my total submission, my total self.

Though I've been given this second life, I won't toy with it. I won't seek out danger. I won't taunt a true death.

I will protect my life. I will share it with this man who has given me a reason to live to the fullest. I will no longer harness myself and dangle the tether of my life.

Well... not unless Hadrian is holding the other end of the rope while I'm tied down to a bed.

"I want to take you to my cellar," he says.

"What's there?"

"My play room."

"You mean like video games or something?"

His grin is wicked. "Come see."

I follow him out of the house and down into the earth. I'd follow him anywhere. When he opens the door to the dark dungeon of the cellar, I gasp. I don't step back. I step forward, ready to strap into whatever paces he wants to put me through.

I turn to him, offering him my wrists. "I'm yours."

"And I'm yours."

Hadrian spends the rest of the night, the rest of our forever, showing me that he is indeed the master at what he does. He is no longer the Prince of Pain. He has become my Prince of Pleasure.

HER VAMPIRE LORD

CHAPTER ONE

*G*aius

“MASTER GAIUS, please may I suck your cock?”

My cock twitches in my pants, as though it will answer the woman’s desperate plea. I’m only semi aroused. Most of my blood is still in my brain because my mind is elsewhere. That is why I came here in the first place; I need more blood in my system.

“I’ve been such a good girl, Master Gaius,” says a different feminine voice from the first. “Please? Just the tip? I’ll suck it so good, I promise.”

I open my eyes and take a minute to focus. It’s dark in the private room. I don’t need much light to see. My superior sight means I need only a pinprick for me to track my prey.

They are right where I left them, inside this locked room with leather padding for walls, chains dangling from the ceiling, and sex toys littering the floor. Both women are on the floor. Knees spread. Hands on thighs, bound together with fur-lined cuffs. Nipples tight, begging for attention.

The dark buds remind me of the berries that should be growing in my vineyard and my mind wanders again.

For centuries, I have been able to grow grapes in any soil I dig my fingers into, be it the briny regions of France or the saline coasts of Spain. But here, in the dry desert of southwest America, my vines are refusing to yield.

"Please, Master Gaius, may I come?"

Once more, my attention is called back to the present. I focus fully on the two women on the floor. Their bodies are trembling, like an earthquake is waking beneath them, ready to break them apart. The earthquake is a pair of Sybian sex machines.

The two women sit astride the Sybians' saddles. Nestled between their thighs is a dildo with a ribbed base that vibrates against their clit at the front and their anus at the back. The controller is set to a low hum, just enough to tease but not send anyone into orgasmic spasms. Unless the rider has been astride for a long time.

Glancing at my watch, I realize I've been here for at least a half an hour, riding these women. The scent of their sex fills the room. The air is humid with their moist juices and sweat. Their areolas are bubblegum pink and Hershey brown from the pleasure. Their labia are more red than pink from the delectable abuse of the machine.

On their asses are dark marks from the flogger I used on them. The device sits at my feet now. Hershey Brown's gaze is fastened on the device as she pants her desire for more. Bubblegum Pink's eyes are closed, her head lolling back. On her neck are two twin pricks that have puckered another shade of pink; a tiny trail of red blood meanders down her long throat.

She tasted like a stick of gum after the flogging. Sweet at the first bite, but the flavor only lasted a few moments. I liked my food saccharine. Hence, the Sybians.

The girls should now be ripe for the taking. The endorphins should have flooded their blood by now, making

for a satisfying two-course dinner. But I am an admitted food snob. I like my meals cooked perfectly.

I turn the dial from low to medium. The two women mewl. They're both on the cusp of coming. Hershey Brown's eyes flash golden, her inner animal eager to come out to play.

"I'll let the last one who comes suck my cock," I say.

Their purrs are guttural. I can see their pussies shiver at the thought, then shiver in earnest as I turn the dial up to high. Their mewls sound closer to the growls of wolves. I watch impassively, my fangs twitching more than my dick. I want them in my mouth, their endorphin-rich, sweet blood. Having me in their mouths?

I give an internal shrug.

Sex has always been a game for me. One that I could never afford to lose. If I didn't bring forth the pleasure for *her*, then there would only be pain for me.

The buzzing of the sex machines pulls me back to the matter at hand. The two pussy cats are shivering, and the dial has one more setting. Asshole that I am, I switch the dial past high and wait for them to erupt.

Their mewling fills my ears. The scent of their juices fills my nostrils. The iron from their blood touches my tongue. But they hold out. I'm not sure if it's the competition between them or if they just really want to suck my cock. I don't really care so long as their hands stay bound. To have either of their claws on my flesh would bring back memories I have locked down tight.

I rise, waiting for the inevitable eruption. I think Bubblegum Pink will be the first to crash into orgasm. I loosen my belt buckle and take a step towards Hershey Brown.

A buzzing in my pants stops me. I look down at my phone. When I see the name on the caller ID, I immediately hit *talk*.

"Is she there?"

The caller doesn't even bother with hello. She has manners, I've seen them first hand. But she is a single-minded woman.

"No, Marechal," I say. "Your sister isn't here."

My brother Hadrian would never allow Carignan, his new eternal bride, to be unclothed before another. He has her locked inside his own private dungeon at our estates tonight, sating her more base needs in the privacy of our home.

"When do you expect her back?" asks Marechal.

This is the problem with turning new vampires. Humans are so connected in this new world. People text, snap, chat, and DM constantly, not allowing anyone the ability to disappear. It would all be so simple if Marechal was made to simply forget about her sister. But Cari wouldn't hear of it.

Truth be told, I don't want to hear of it either. If Marechal were mind-wiped and made to forget her sister, she would have to forget me too. Though we've only had two encounters in person, I would sorely miss the disdain and dismissal in her gaze when she looks at me.

"I need to talk to her," says Marechal in her clipped, business voice. The woman is a logical, practical, methodical scientist through and through.

I haven't seen her make a single emotional move since I met her. She never has a hair out of place, not even when her sister went missing and her brother was in an accident. Marechal had taken a deep breath, begun a checklist of what to do, and assigned each of my brothers a task. I had wanted to snatch the pad and pen out of her hand, tug at the strands of her perfectly coiffed hair, and break the buttons of her starched shirt.

But I don't play with humans any longer. They're too fragile for my particular tastes. Plus, I never enjoyed wiping their minds when things got a little rough, which they always did with me.

"They'll be back from their honeymoon soon," I soothe, lying easily.

Hadrian likely has his bride bound to a Saint Andrew's Cross and is fucking the living daylights out of her. I can't very well tell her older sister that hunch. Nor can I invite her over to see that her sister is perfectly fine, because she isn't. Not yet.

Newly turned vampires are hungry beasts. It takes a while for them to gain control over their animal instincts. If Marechal happened upon Carignan during this adolescent stage of her new life, where she is completely uninhibited, indulgent, and self-centered, it would turn out bloody.

"Where are you?" Marechal asks. "It sounds like you're at an animal shelter filled with cats."

I turn back to the scene in one of Club Toxic's private sex dungeons. I'd nearly forgotten about the two pussies on the fucking machines. They are sweating profusely as they try not to come.

"I am," I say. "I'm at a benefit for wayward animals."

"You? I didn't take you for a philanthropist."

I'm not. "I give back." I don't.

I care only about my pleasure and the wellbeing of my family. Carignan is now part of my family. She is my sister, and I will protect her as I do my brothers.

Hmm? Does that make Marechal my sister as well?

I don't like that thought. I'm more interested in what Marechal would look like if she were on one of the machines. Riding it without a stitch of fabric on her body. Her hair down and free. Her head thrown back as I slap her nipples until they are tight peaks.

"I'm going to get off now," Marechal says, and I nearly choke. "You'll call me the moment they walk in the door?"

Oh, she is still talking about her sister and Hadrian. "I give you my word."

"I'm still not entirely convinced this isn't a kidnapping, you know."

That is another thought I like: grabbing Marechal and absconding with her against her will. Modern women say they don't like that, but the billion-dollar romance novel industry begs to differ. Women like to be told what to do. I like to be the one telling them.

"You never told me when you wanted me to come over," she says.

"Come over?"

"To look at your vine."

I've had two dripping, mewling pussies at my feet all night. But at Marechal's words, my dick goes instantly hard.

"You said it's going through a rough patch?"

"There's nothing wrong with my vine."

"You said it had rot; you showed me, remember?"

Right. She's talking about the vineyard. My pristine grapes are having trouble in the acrid, dry Tucson soil.

"The Palmezzos had trouble with that soil too," Marechal goes on. "When I was a kid, the migrants who worked the land said that it was cursed."

I am a centuries-old vampire. I have seen more than my fair share of the unexplained, and lived long enough to learn the explanation. There is magic in the world, but there is no such thing as a—

"But you and I know there is no such thing as a curse," Marechal says. "I'm sure there's an explanation. I'll be over tomorrow."

"I'll come to you," I say.

"It would be much easier if I studied the vine in its native soil."

"Too dangerous. I mean, I wouldn't want to take you away from your business."

"I do have a busy day tomorrow."

"I'll come over at sundown."

"Fine," she says. "Just let me know when you hear from my sister. And do something about those cats."

And with that, she clicks off.

I turn my attention back to the dripping pussies. Hershey Brown's eyes are rolling back in her head. With a loud thud, she falls over. Bubblegum Pink grins in triumph. I guess I'll be fucking her mouth for the rest of the evening, though my dick has softened now that Marechal is no longer in my ear.

I reach for my belt again, but a second thud fills my ears. Bubblegum Pink has collapsed on the floor, her body shuddering from a toe-curling orgasm. When the tremors stop, both women lie in comatose heaps on the ground.

I'm not put out. I call one of the attendants to see to their aftercare. Then I pour myself a glass of wine. The color is a brown that shifts to a shade of purple in the low light. It is the exact color of Marechal Durand's eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

*M*arechal

I FIND it illuminating that my best work is done in the dark. I was afraid of the dark at the start of my life. Even during the daytime, I found the absence of light when I closed my eyes terrifying. My mother told me that I'd been born with my eyes open, needing to see everything. It's one of the last things I remember her telling me.

That, and that I needed to take care of my baby sister.

Carignan was placed in my arms on a dark night. As the moon had risen high in the sky, I watched my mother close her eyes for the last time. When she did, I did as I was told. I didn't take my eyes off my baby sister. I'd kept that promise for the last twenty years.

Then my dad died, the business began to fail, and now my cup runneth over.

I reach for my cell phone, to text my baby sister, to call her, to find out where the hell she is and what time she'll be home tonight. I already know that she won't answer. I know because I've been calling her nonstop for the past week. I

raised her to be a little too like me: stubborn and willful, with a mind dead set on achieving her goal.

Through the window, I can see the day laborers making their way onto the vineyard. It's grape-picking season. Another bang up year for the Durand Vineyards. But will it be enough to save the business my father worked all his life to build?

My papa left the business in my hands to run. My *maman* left my sister in my arms to guide. In a matter of days, I might manage to lose them both.

Back in my room, I stare at my face in the mirror. The bags under my eyes weigh more than I do. They've been there since I was a teenager, taking care of an infant at night while going to school by day, and working in the vineyard's labs after school. Luckily, my skin has enough of the Mediterranean Sea in it that it's easy to conceal my workaholic tendencies. I balance the dark circles below with eyeshadow and mascara above.

With my face made up, I gather my dark hair into a tight bun. Using a few pins, I secure any wayward strands that dare defy the style. Doing up the last button in my starched, collared shirt, I run my hands over my fitted skirt and finally feel put together. No, it's not the most practical outfit to wear for someone who runs a vineyard, but most of my time is spent in the lab.

To complete the outfit, I step into a pair of vintage high heels. The shoes belonged to my mother. They add a touch of femininity to my boss bitch demeanor. And they remind me of the only maternal touch I've had in my life.

Both the sun and the moon are in the sky when I step outside. The sun is lingering on its way out. The moon is chomping at the bit to take over in the darkening sky.

The stems of my heels are thick enough that my shoes don't sink into the ground. I make my way down the straight lines of vines. The uniformity of the rows settles

me. The plumpness of the berries makes me feel light. The fruit has ripened exactly on my schedule.

"Happy harvest, Ms. Durand."

Zahara's gaze isn't on me. It's on the berries that are about to fall off the vine into the basket she carries.

"I'm glad to see you again," I say.

Zahara and her family have been coming up every harvest from Mexico and parts of Central America since before I was born. Like most of the other migrant women, Zahara is dressed in a peasant wrapped skirt in the colors of the desert. Reds, oranges, browns, and greens. Her loose and colorful fashion is like night and day to my dark, constraining threads.

"I was sorry to hear about your father," she says, finally catching my eyes. "He was a good man."

"Thank you," I say, breaking the eye contact.

My family is not a subject I like to bring up in business. Besides, there is a lot of work to be done. It would be more efficient if I had the grapes mechanically picked. But there are some traditions I prefer to keep.

There are a few dozen of Zahara's people walking out into the rows of vines. More than the last harvest. For the first time, there are males.

"I see we have some new faces this year," I say.

One of the men looks over at us just then. He's too young to catch my interest—likely he's just out of his teens, like Zahara. But he is man enough to catch my gaze and hold it for a few seconds. There is no interest in his dark eyes. He looks away from me to Zahara. She glances down rather than holding his gaze as he approaches.

"Is the man of the house here yet, miss? I would like to speak with him about some matters." His voice is deeper than I expect. This young man probably had to grow up quickly, like me. Too bad he wasn't taught manners.

"I'm the man of the house. It's Ms. Durand. Or Boss, if you prefer."

The inner corners of his eyes pull, a clear sign of irritation. Without any further word, the man turns on his heel and walks back into the fields.

Well, if he doesn't like working for a woman, he can walk out the gate. Zahara is still on the ground, plucking away, a small smile playing at her lips.

"I don't think he'll be the one to buy me the World's Best Boss coffee mug this year," I say.

Zahara's smile grows wider, but she still doesn't look up at me. The movement lights up her face. If she ever wanted, she could be a model. Her looks are wasted in the vineyard.

Not that I would ever encourage a woman to make her way in the world on anything but her brain.

I know I have a pretty face. I look exactly like my mother. But I was always more interested in blending grapes than I was in kissing boys. Sipping at a boy's lips never gave me as much pleasure as the first sip of sweet red wine.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I turn away from Zahara and answer the call immediately, not bothering to look at the caller ID.

"Cari?"

"No, it's me. Your brother."

I try to hold in my sigh. Arneis and I haven't been on the best of terms these last couple of weeks. He wants to sell the family business, while I've been busting my ass to save it.

"She still with that creep?"

"He's not a creep, Arneis. We both met him."

"You saw how he couldn't take his eyes off Cari. He acted like he owned her, like some *Fifty Shades* dominance crap."

This time, I do let out my sigh. I watched Hadrian Serrano with my sister. He looked lost for her, hopelessly in love. He and Arneis had nearly come to blows when Arneis had suggested they put Cari into an institution after her latest daredevil stunt. But when I saw Cari and Hadrian

together, I knew her time skydiving was over. When she looked up at him, she'd seemed grounded, settled.

"I think he's good for her," I say. "I just wish they hadn't run away to get married."

"Well, that's not all he's run away with. I just found out the Serranos have bought our debt."

I go to take another step, but I can't move. My heel is stuck in the fertile ground of the vineyard. Instead of pulling myself out of the earth, I stumble to grasp onto my brother's words.

Unbeknownst to any of us, our father had taken out debt against the land. But he hadn't gone the traditional, legal route. He'd taken loans from some unsavory people. Arneis found out before I did, and tried to handle it on his own. But whenever a politician gets in bed with criminals, it's more often than not the lawmaker who suffers. Arneis's once-promising career in local politics is now on shaky ground.

"The Serranos bought five million shares in Durand Incorporated. They own more than fifty percent of the company."

Despite my heel coming free, I am still stuck in place. That simply is not possible. I had shut down all attempts for the bad seeds to buy the vineyard out. One of the local banks had given me weeks to come up with the money. By the end of the harvest, I would have it. But apparently, someone has already beaten me to it.

Not only has my sister's new husband taken her away from me, he's taken control of my livelihood. Little does he know, I am not the submissive sort. I never glance away from a man. Not only would I hold his gaze, but I'd also make him back down and give me back what is mine: my sister, and my business.

CHAPTER THREE

Gaius

I KNOW I'm having a nightmare when my dick goes limp.

I'm normally in a perpetual state of readiness, even when I slumber. Legs spread, knees parted, dripping, quivering pussies come at me from everywhere I turn. My dreams are typically not much different than my waking hours. Both are filled with submissives eager for a taste of my cock.

My nightmares, when they come, are different.

Darkness falls as women close their legs. Their cries of delight hush into whispers that are then choked into a gurgled murmur. All falls silent as she comes to my bed.

Her white hair is stark against the dark sky, rivaling the moonlight. Her long, porcelain limbs are fine and appear breakable. Looks can be deceiving. Her blood-red lips are coated with the gloss of her latest victim. It's the same red that coats the tips of her nails, which she reaches towards me.

I let my mouth slack in awe, though she's never turned me on—likely because she has a habit of digging her nails into my balls and telling me how much I love it. It took a few decades but eventually, my mind made way for that pain to become—well, not pleasure, but something less than pain. Though I never became the pain slut Domitia wished me to be.

I know that is why she likes to play with me. She wants to break me of my dominance. For centuries, I allowed her to amuse herself with my body. I allowed her to test my limits.

She is my sire. She gave me this new, everlasting life. But she never broke my mind.

In my nightmare, before she can pounce on me and ensnare me in the cock ring she uses to keep me in check, I reach for her. My clever fingers begin their magic trick as I shove all five of them into her. I work my fist like my life depends on it. Because it does.

I pump into her, fisting her roughly, just the way she likes it. In a matter of moments, she is quivering beneath me, liking the pain as much as the pleasure. Maybe a little more.

Her orgasm is long, deep. I do not stop working my hands, using my free hand to pinch her nipples, her clit, to intensify her trembling. She shudders, in the throes of another orgasm. Even then, I do not stop. As long as she's coming, she cannot strike. I do not stop until she is a quivering mess. All the while, my dick remains limp.

There's a part of me, the conscious me, that wants to wrap my hand around her throat and squeeze until her pretty little head pops off. Only, I know that she would like that. All I want is out of the nightmare. I want to wake up to a world where Domitia no longer exists.

Instead of thinking of murdering my dead sire, I think pink. Because I'm all for women's liberation. So, I think of all the pussies I've made quiver over the last month. Hell,

all the pussies I made drip over the last few days should be enough to push thoughts of her pale, sadistic ass from my mind.

Once again in my dreams: thighs spread. Clitorises glisten. Nipples tighten. But there isn't much pink that I'm seeing.

I see dark skin, the color of a golden *sémillon* grape. As a pussy connoisseur, I know that not all labia are colored in the same shade. I know that, with the touches of honey in her skin, her pussy will be darker, likely a ruddy brown. They say the darker the berry, the sweeter the pussy juices. I'm certain that Marechal's pussy will be the sweetest I've tasted in a while.

I jerk in my sleep, but I don't wake. I've been wanting Marechal Durand for some time now. It's not the first time I've dreamed of her.

I take my time in peeling off that form-fitting skirt she likes to wear. I lose my patience at the buttoned-up shirt though, ripping the fabric apart to reveal nipples tipped with caramel morsels. The shoes, I leave on. She has a penchant for vintage French shoes. I know because not only am I a pussy connoisseur, I'm also a clothes whore. The shoes, she can keep. They'll look fantastic thrown over my shoulder as I lick her pussy.

Before I dip my head to Marechal's sweet cunny, I see a flash of porcelain in my peripheral vision. Her blood-red nails flying at me isn't what makes my blood curdle. It's that she goes for Marechal's throat.

I'm gasping for air as I jolt awake. One hand bats at a pillow on my bed. The other is twined in the sheet, ripping it to shreds.

I blink a few times before my room comes into focus. There is a light shining over me. I never sleep in the dark, even though my eyesight is sharper than an owl's.

I check every corner before I've convinced myself that she is not there. It's been a long time since she's invaded

my nightmares. But over the last week, her presence in my life has returned. Not that she ever truly left the mind she'd tried to break for centuries. I may not have broken, but she's definitely left me twisted.

I rise and dress for the day. My closet spans half the west wing of the mansion I share with my brothers, and is filled to the brim with decades of fashion. My body hasn't changed in four hundred years. I could still wear the breeches made for me in the sixteenth century. Or the pantaloons from the seventeenth. Though I'm sure the mold of my dick and my ass would cause women on the streets to stop and stare. Instead of vintage French, I decide on tailored Italian.

It's late in the evening by the time I emerge from my closet and am ready to greet the night. On my nightstand, my phone is beeping. I look down to see Marechal Durand's number. My spirits instantly lift at the thought of seeing her tonight. Perhaps tonight will be the night I find out whether I'm right about the color of her nipples and pussy.

"Ms. Durand, I was just on my way over—"

"Cut the crap, Serrano. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Not the greeting I expected. But it's been a while since I've had a challenge. I mentally adjust my timeline of having Marechal Durand's thighs open by a few hours later this evening.

"You've got some balls on you, mister."

She is right about that. Though I think agreeing with her will add a few hours to her thighs opening for me.

"First, you take my sister. And now my business."

"I assure you that your sister is fine. As for your business, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I just learned you and your brothers bought my vineyard."

I curse under my breath. When I find Hadrian, who is likely out in his sex dungeon burying his face between

Carignan's thighs right now, I'm going to stake him.

"Where are you?" I ask, already gathering my car keys to head to her vineyard. But first, I'll need to tear my brother away from his bride and see where his head was at with this decision. We don't have the capacity to take on another vineyard with this crop struggling as it is.

"I'm walking onto your estate right now. And I—ahhh! "

The sound of Marechal's scream is the last thing I hear on the line before it goes dead. But the sound is still loud in my ear. It's coming from outside, very near the dungeon at the side of the property. If Marechal happened across her newly turned sister, their family reunion would be deadly. I drop my phone and dash out the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

*M*arechal

A SHARP PAIN radiates up my ankle after my ass hits the ground. I look down, more concerned that I've damaged my heel than twisted my ankle. I'm relieved to see that my shoes are still intact, though there are dirt smudges on the fabric.

I let out a long sigh. It's going to take me all night to get the specks of earth out. I'm usually not so careless as to walk into a vineyard in heels, but I'm not thinking clearly at the moment. What the hell am I doing out on this property in the night?

I've spent my life making rational decisions. I've had to. Women in this business aren't often taken seriously, not even when our names are on the checks.

Despite being born into the family business, I had to fight for every position, every promotion, every share I earned in the Durand Vineyard. It was no matter that my father praised every single one of my efforts. I knew I had to earn my way to gain the respect of others. And I had. Only to be handed the reins of a failing business.

I'd had no idea of the debt we were in while my father was alive. I'd woken each day and done the job I'd earned to the fullest of my abilities. I'd thought I was making strides, yet my efforts were barely making a dent in the debt. And now, it is all gone.

The hell with that.

I push up on my elbows and try to get my feet under me. But my foot doesn't budge. There is rope twisted around my ankle. I realize that's what my foot caught on, and the reason why I fell.

Who would leave rope out in the middle of a driveway?

One of the irresponsible Serrano brothers, that's who.

I've parked my car at the end of the drive. It was the only spot available after the line of expensive sports cars that scream that the owners have small manhoods. I would weep for my poor sister, but I know that the size of a man's instrument has nothing to do with his skill in using it.

The few times I've come in contact with a penis left me certain that I have no use for a permanent one. Not even one with a battery compartment. I'd purchased a battery-operated boyfriend after my last relationship fizzled. The vibrations of the sex toy had not aided in me getting off. I've never gotten off. I'm sure all the women I've seen in porn videos are just faking it.

There is no such thing as a female orgasm. It's just another lie made up by men to get women to drop their panties. Like tales of Santa Claus, or the Easter Bunny, or the Tooth Fairy: you have to be good, to give something up, in hopes that you will get a prize at the end. But I'd never had the patience to wait a whole year for Christmas presents. Chocolate eggs only lead to a trip to the dentist. Even as a child, I knew my baby teeth were more valuable than a couple of coins. So, I am not a believer.

But something about the rope against my foot, holding me down, sparks something in me. The knot that holds me still also eases something inside of me. For the first time in

days—hell, it's the first time in years—I am made to hold still.

I lower my elbows down until my back is pressed against the cool earth. I look up at the night sky and notice the stars twinkling down at me. All is quiet. All is still. Something cool rests against my skin. I think it might be called peace.

The sound of a pebble kicking up and landing snaps me back to the present. I am bound, trapped, unable to rise, and something is coming in the darkness.

A figure looms over me. Broad shoulders that block out the moon and cast me into darkness. A narrow waist that extends into two powerful legs standing over me. The legs end in an expensive pair of Italian shoes that I take a moment to admire before glancing back up.

Gaius Serrano is looking down at me. His lips part into a sly smile.

I catch my breath. I'm a tall woman. I've stood toe to toe with Gaius before, and his height dwarfs me. But having him tower over me makes me feel... breathless.

I inhale, and smell the spicy scent of him alongside the sweetness of the vines. I gaze up his strong, powerful thighs, and my gaze catches on the bulge in his pants. He crouches down and my gaze stays on the bulge as it comes to eye level with me.

"Ms. Durand."

His voice is like Japanese plum wine. I hate the stuff because it is far too sweet, like confection candy. His words give me a sugar rush as his breath reaches my nose. He's only said my name, but it feels as though it's echoing through my mind. His candied tone slides down my throat and warms my chest.

"Are you checking out the competition?"

I blink. "Competition?" Does he really think his wine is at all comparable to Durand's? I scramble to get my legs

under me so that I can be on a level with him. But I forget that I am trapped in the rope some careless person left out.

Gaius looks down and notes it. Something sparks in his eyes; something dark and possessive. Like he's seen his pet trying to make a break for it. I expect him to yank on the lead and bring me to heel. I'm breathless as I wait.

This is insane. I have never been on any man or woman's lead. I have always been the one holding the reins.

From his crouched position, Gaius's large hand comes to my calf. I shiver from the heat of his touch. He doesn't immediately free me. He runs his thumb between the rope and my skin.

I forget to struggle as I marvel at the different textures of the twine and the pad of his thumb. Again, a sense of relief washes over me. All of the stresses of the day—gone. The pile of bills and notices on my desk—forgotten. The worry over my brother and sister—a distant memory.

I have the sense that if I simply stay in this man's grasp, all will be right with the world. It's the most ridiculous notion I've ever heard of in my life. I give a kick to remove his hand and loosen the rope. The rope loosens, but his grip tightens.

Immediately, I stop my motion and come to heel.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gaius

I LOOK DOWN at the treat that fate has delivered me. My incisors water at the sight. Marechal Durand is sprawled out on the ground. Her knees, which are usually trapped in her form-fitting skirts, are akimbo. I can't quite see up her skirt, but my imagination runs wild as my gaze travels up the curvy pathway of her hips.

Her chest heaves in her white blouse. The top button has come undone, leaving the lapels askew. Her ample breasts rest lopsided under the fabric. They're practically begging my hands to free them of the bra and set them straight.

Her hair, which I've only ever seen in a tight and tame bun, has a few strands loose and around her heart-shaped face. The dark locks curl around the nape of her neck the way a tongue would sample the salty-sweetness of a trickle of sweat there.

None of that is what makes my dick go hard.

I slide my gaze all the way back down to whence I began until my eyes come to rest on the length of rope that has

bound her right ankle. The strands twine from the stem of her vintage heel, over her ankle, and end at her calf. I couldn't have made a more artful design if I'd tied her up myself.

"Are you going to stand there and stare?" Marechal hisses. "Or are you going to help me?"

I put one knee to the ground, not giving a damn about the ruination of my expensive, tailored slacks. Even though I'm bent over, I still tower over her. She has to tilt her head back to gaze up at me. Her gaze is hooded in that way a woman has when she knows that a man has taken power over her.

I hold her gaze. The color of her eyes reminds me of Kyoho grape: a dark, black-purple fruit that appears fathomless. When you bite into the fruit, it's pure sweetness, like plum wine.

I can sense that a part of her is uncomfortable. Marechal Durand is a woman used to being in complete control of herself and everything around her. I can scent that she is aroused. With my expert hearing, I can hear the brush of her pebbled nipples against the fine starch of her blouse.

"Mr. Serrano?" Her voice is breathless in her attempt to be in command. "Are you going to be a gentleman and help me, or not?"

"I think I'll stare for another moment," I say.

Her gaze goes wide. When it does, I note that her eyes aren't as dark as I'd first thought. There are hints of gold at the edges, and a lighter shade of purple at the center. I've never seen the color before. I stare, mesmerized.

I reach for her—whether to lick the Sémillion gold of her skin or kiss the Kyoto purple in her eyes, I'm not sure. I'm not about to find out, either.

Marechal jerks back, away from my seeking fingers. But she can't get far. She is bound and at my mercy. Just the way I like my women.

I've never taken a woman against her will. That's not my style or my taste. I like to hold them still while I find every way imaginable to elicit pleasure from them. Most women struggle for one orgasm. With ease, I help them to find multiple releases until they are so sated from riding my fingers, my mouth, or my lash that they pass out. When they're out cold is when I like to take my due, feeding on their sweet blood from a vein in their thigh.

I already know that Marechal's blood will be the sweetest I've had in a long time. There's something about a human who was raised in a vineyard. Their very essence takes on the sweetness of the berries. Tack that on to the rush of breaking this strong, proud woman, and I need to shut my mouth before she sees just how much she makes my fangs ache.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

The crack in her voice gives away the desire she denies in herself. The flare of her nostrils let me know she wants it, even if the set of her jaw warns me that she will never ask. Fuck, I can't wait to make her beg for it.

I pull my hands away and hold them up so that she sees they are empty. "You asked for my help. I'm helping you."

She doesn't relax. Good. I don't want her to. I like her on edge. I like Marechal Durand uncertain and out of control.

I want to ruck up her skirts until I can see what she covers that sweet treasure with. Will her panties be cloth or lace? I want to tug even more strands of her hair free and set the locks loose about her shoulders. I want her back to arch as I make her come more times than either of us can count.

"Do you want me to free you, Ms. Durand?"

Marechal gulps and then nods.

Again, I reach for her. She holds still. She is stiff as a board when my fingers touch her.

I unwind the rope from her shoe and my breath catches. The rope has made a light red mark on her skin. Part of me

is angry that the rope belonged to Hadrian. I want only my marks on her.

I take my time untangling her. The pattern is exquisite on her flesh. I would've thought that her honey-brown skin wouldn't mark so easily. Thank the Fates, I'm wrong. My thumb wipes over the indentations left on her flesh, and I have to bite my own lip.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"I'm setting you free."

I deliberately rub the rope over her calf as I unwind the knot. Her lower lip trembles. Her eyelids flutter.

So, Ms. Marechal Durand has some kink in her tightly coiled person. It's always the quiet women. The ones who are the boss bitches. Put them in front of a truly dominant man, and they will open their pretty little mouths and spout the filthiest demands. Put a hand in their hundred dollar hairdo and tug, and they will drop to their knees in submission.

"You said you wanted me to help you. That's what I'm doing, Marechal. That's what you want."

"I..."

Her foot is free of the rope. She could pull away. If she wanted to.

Her eyes are wide as they stare at my hands. My fingers creep up her bared calf. If she asks, I'll say I'm checking for injury.

She doesn't ask.

My fingers make it past her knees, both of our gazes holding fast to their journey. The darkness up her skirt is allowing in a ray of moonlight. Soon, she will allow in my fingers. Then my tongue. Then I'll turn her over and make a beautiful pattern on her ass with my flogger.

"Mr. Serrano..."

I prefer women to call me *Sir*, *Master*. But the way she uses my surname makes my balls tighten. Role play usually

isn't my thing, but I will happily be a naughty schoolboy to her disapproving teacher.

"Yes, Ms. Durand?"

"You can stop that now."

"Stop what? I'm freeing you from what was holding you back."

She gulps. Her throat works as one hand squeezes her calf and the other treks up her knee. The rope bruised her ankle, and there is a spot of blood there.

My mouth waters for it. I'm hundreds of years old, so I don't pounce on the wound. But, *futuo*, I want to sip it. This woman has me so randy, I'm swearing in ancient tongues.

"I..."

Before Marechal can get anything else out, a snarl sounds in the air, followed by a yelp, as though the one who tried to scream has been stifled by a hand over her mouth

"Is that Cari?" Marechal snatches her leg from my hold and is on her feet.

She'd fallen just outside the converted barn. The converted barn where Hadrian stores all of his favorite toys. The toy shed where he takes his new bride each night for some good ole fashioned, medieval sex play.

I'm guessing they're in there now, and Carignan has scented her sister's blood. I can't let the two see each other. If Marechal learned of her sister's dark fate, we'd have to wipe her mind. Mind wiping is a nasty business, and Marechal could forget she ever knew her sister at all. That wouldn't even be the worst outcome.

Carignan is a newly turned vampire, barely a week old. Newly turned vampires don't have complete control of themselves. If Cari hurt her sister, neither would live through it. Marechal would lose her life, and Cari could no longer live with herself.

CHAPTER SIX

*M*arechal

EVEN THOUGH GAIUS has slipped my foot and ankle free from the rope, I do not feel free. I can still feel the imprint of his warm palm as it pressed into my calf. The trail his fingers made as they crept over my kneecap still burns where he touched me.

His touch was light. But it weighed me down. I didn't feel trapped. I felt free.

All the weight that has been piled up on my shoulders from the year without my father, from the woes of worrying over my brother, from caring for my baby sister all these years—all of it rose from my person and dissipated into the night air. I had never felt so light as I had in the darkness.

I'd had the absurd notion to snuggle into Gaius's warm chest. To allow my knees to go slack and give him entrance. My entire body ached to go limp and allow him to carry me someplace, any place, where I no longer had a care in the world.

Until I heard the scream.

"Is that Cari?"

The sharp cry pulls me out of the insanity into which I was descending. Yanking my leg away from Gaius's hold, I rise on my own. I tug my skirt down until it covers my kneecaps and I straighten my spine.

It is Cari's voice. I know it for certain. I've heard her crying since the first night she was born, through her terrible toddler years, on into her rebellious teenage phase, up to the night our father died beside her in the car crash.

I know my sister's voice better than I know my own. I know her shouts of joy. I know her cries of displeasure. What I'd just heard sounded like one of her indignant demands.

As her caretaker when I was just a teen myself, I'd heard those tantrums many a time when we were in a grocery store trapped in an aisle where all of the candies were eye level with small children. She would ask for a treat. I would say no. She'd pitch a fit. Most parents would've given in. I wasn't most parents. I was her older sister and my will was stronger than hers, only barely. Nine times out of ten, we got out of the line and the candy stayed behind.

I hear that same teeth-clenching, migraine-inducing, patience-snatching sound now. It's coming from the structure beside the house. The stone cottage looks like a wine cellar.

I take a step towards the path. As I do, the weight returns to my shoulders. The worry reforms on my brow. The responsibility that has clung to me all of my life settles back into its place at the bottom of my heart.

Rolling my head and allowing the tendons in my neck to crackle and pop, I let the pressure fall back into place. Once it does, I pick up my pace. I need to get to my sister.

"Your sister isn't here." Gaius is at my ear, barely breaking a sweat as his long strides match my quick steps.

"You're lying to me. I heard her."

I'm at the entrance to the wine cellar. I tug at the door, but it does not budge. I turn to face Gaius, giving him my

sternest glare. This is the glare that had seven-year-old Cari getting out of bed for school in the morning. It is also the glare that had her climbing into bed at night after being told multiple times to go.

"Open the door," I demand.

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Can't or won't?"

My gaze narrows on him. My shoulders are square. My chin lifted. I'm giving him my full-on boss bitch stare down.

He doesn't blink. He holds my glare, gazing down at me with a look I've seen in many men's eyes: desire.

That's new. Most men back away with their balls tucked high in their scrotum. Gaius Serrano bites his lip as he leans against the doorframe, backing me into the cool stone.

"Won't," he finally answers.

"Because you're holding my sister against her will in there?"

"No." He leans into me, his voice lowered to a whisper. "Rest assured that neither I nor either of my brothers does anything to a woman that she doesn't beg us to do."

He bites his lip again. The lower one this time. Even in the darkness with only starlight to see, I can see the redness of his plump lip. His mouth tugs into a smirk as he gazes down at me.

The man is seriously handsome. The word *beautiful* could be used to describe him. He has the chiseled Mediterranean looks of my ancestors. The high cheekbones and rounded chin of the ancient Gauls. His eyes are the darkest brown, but there's a light that shines from within. It's almost hypnotic. Luckily for me, I've never been a woman prone to fall under any man's spell.

"I think you're lying to me," I say.

"*Non, minou.*"

"Did you just call me a kitten?"

"Non." But he smiles as though I'm missing the punchline of a joke.

"Just tell me where she is?"

"I don't know where my brother and your sister are right now. But it's not in there."

"Prove it," I say. "Open the door."

"Are you sure?"

"Do it," I command.

Any other man would flinch. Gaius Serrano simply smiles wider, looking every bit the French version of the Cheshire Cat. He slips a key from his pocket and unlocks the door.

The door creaks open on uncoiled hinges. It is the soundtrack that starts every horror scene when the dingbat damsel runs for the shed instead of the running car. His dark gaze is a challenge.

I accept.

Turning on my heel, I walk into the door and stop in my tracks.

It's dark inside, with only a few lights. That small bit of illumination casts the space in a sepia hue. But it's enough light to see what goes on in here.

Barrels line the walls. The pleasant smell of cherry and vanilla oak is what reminds me to stop holding my breath and inhale deeply after I get over my shock. Though I doubt I will ever recover from what I'm seeing.

My brain struggles to comprehend what I'm seeing. So, I don't say anything immediately. I could be mistaken. If I am, and I say the wrong thing, I would be too embarrassed to ever show my face in polite society ever again.

Because maybe I am wrong about the contents of this room. I know the Serrano wine enterprise is ancient. It dates back to the 1600s. Perhaps they're still using medieval devices to make their wines?

But what use would they have for a Saint Andrew's Cross which takes center stage in the room? Or a guillotine with

leather padding? And I've never seen a flogger being used to stomp or strain grapes.

No, this room is definitely what I think it is. A sex dungeon. I know because I've seen one before.

Not in real life. On the porn sites I checked out long ago. The only ones that ever seemed somewhat real to me were the ones where the submissive was tied up on apparatus like these, and a Dominant was taking her to task.

My breath catches. I press my thighs together. At my lower calves, I feel the spot where the rope has left a mark on my leg.

On the walls, I see a similar rope hanging loose. The memory of the free-floating I felt when trapped while Gaius loomed over me returns. Another glance at the placards of the cross, and I feel a tingle run up my spine. A peek at the flogger's tails, and the whisper of a burn on my ass flares and dies in the span of a second.

I feel a tendril of hair escape my bun and coil around my neck. My fingers tremble as I smooth the hair back into place. I run my hands down my skirt, straightening the already composed fabric.

I remember watching that video and my entire body heating. I'd only watched it the once and then deleted my browser history. It had made me feel so out of control, but I'd never forgotten the sight.

My feet are backpedaling. I need to get out of this room. When I back up, it's into a wall of solid, male warmth.

Gaius has me in his arms. His hands are a cuff around my forearms. His lips are at my ear. I can't help myself; I tremble in his hold.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gaius

I SMELL the arousal running off Marechal in waves. It's all I can do to only keep my hands on her, and not sink my teeth right into her neck. Unlike Cari, I'm centuries old and have perfect control over my hunger. But for the second time tonight, my fangs beg to quarrel with maturity.

Apparently, my dick wants a word too. It's rare that I get hard for a woman—a human, no less. I haven't fucked a warm cunt in years. I prefer to deepthroat a woman's mouth after I've rendered her cunt numb from the pleasure of my flogger. Or to get off between her breasts, after her eyes are rolling back in her head from the countless orgasms I've given her.

Marechal Durand is on her feet and in possession of all her faculties. And a human. Not my type at all. But ever since the day I met her and she extolled her belief that the female orgasm was a myth, I couldn't get the woman out of my mind.

Now I have her in my clutches, in a sex dungeon.

“What exactly kind of wine cellar is this?” she says.

As if she doesn’t know. I didn’t miss the recognition in her gaze as her eyes landed on the Saint Andrew’s Cross in the center of the room. Or the shimmy of her ass when her attention turned to the flogger Hadrian left out.

Luckily, my stalling tactics worked, giving Hadrian and Carignan enough time to slip out of the dungeons using the caverns that ran beneath the structure. Those tunnels lead out to the vineyard, where they could resurface and head back to the house, or away into the night until Marechal is gone.

With my brother and my new sister-in-law out of the picture, I could take a moment and strip the elder Durand down. Perhaps I could soften her up to the idea that her sister has taken on a new life. And while I am softening up Marechal, I could prove just how wrong she is about the female orgasm.

“It’s not for wine,” I say in answer to her question. “This is where my brothers and I like to extract a far more precious nectar.”

Marechal turns in my arms. Her chest is heaving. Her plum grape eyes are wide. She tries to compose herself, but she has no idea that my predatory scent has already pinned her for an evening treat.

“This is a sex dungeon,” she says.

“Yes,” I agree, seeing no reason to deny it. I’m thrilled that she knows something about what is done here, and eager to gauge what she’ll let me do to her here. “Would you like me to show you the process, Marechal?”

I lower my voice to a hypnotic tone that humans are receptive to. Marechal’s nostrils flare, but she glares at me. She has a strong will, for a human. I don’t want to enthrall her. I want her consciously begging me for it.

I want her to pull the pins from her perfect bun and let those thick tresses unravel. I want her to shimmy out of her confining skirt and open her legs to me. I want her to part

those knees that are always pressed together when she walks, and beseech me to lick her dry.

“Have you brought home a treat, brother?”

I turn to find Virius standing in the doorway of the cellar. Tonight, he is dressed in a purple sari wrapped around his bare chest and a pair of red sweat pants with Adidas stripes running down each side. On his feet are a pair of my Italian loafers. I bite my lip instead of yelling at him to keep his hands off my stuff, because I need him to keep his fangs off our guest.

I put myself between Marechal and Viri. Virius is a picky eater. As far as I know, he hasn't drunk straight from the tap, as it were, in decades. Possibly centuries.

“She smells sweet,” says Virius. His gaze flashes in the dim lighting. “She smells like Cari.”

I hadn't noticed Cari's smell before. Not since the night I'd gotten a whiff of Marechal. She smells strong, succulent, and yes, sweet. There is adrenaline coursing through her veins. Her sweet blood is primed for my bite, and mine alone.

I snarl at my brother, my lip curling up as I flash my fangs. The message is clear: I will not be sharing.

Viri holds up his hands. “Fine, don't share. But keep your hands off my stash of bags in the fridge.”

I wait until he is out the door before I relax my shoulders. I prepare myself to answer Marechal's questions about Viri and his strangeness. It's always hard to explain away my brother's oddness.

I had once thought that our Domitia had scarred Hadrian the most. I realized soon after we thought she was dead that I was wrong. Hadrian has recovered. I fear Viri never will.

When I turn to Marechal, she is not looking after Virius. She is glaring at me. The determined set to her chin is back.

"I am done playing around with you, Gaius Serrano. You are going to tell me where my sister is. And you're going to tell me what you are about, buying up the controlling shares to Durand Vineyard."

I am caught off guard. It is a rare feat. That is not at all what I was expecting her to say.

"My patience is wearing thin," she says.

The woman is magnificent. She might've given Domitia a run for her money. As soon as the thought arises, I bury it. I don't want that demon anywhere near this avenging angel.

"Aren't you a bossy little thing," I say.

I itch to take her over my lap and spank some obedience into her. As I advance on her, she takes two strong strides towards me, closing the distance. Her wine-colored eyes are tequila bright. Another man would've backed down. Instead, my dick punches the front of my pants, eager to breach the rest of the distance between us.

"Don't call me bossy," she growls, though it's more like the purr of an irate kitten. "Whenever a woman corrects a man or speaks her mind, she's called bossy by that man. Likely because her words shriveled up his manhood."

"Trust me, *minou*. My manhood is anything but shriveled."

Marechal's gaze dips low, to my pants. The evidence is stark for her to see. I watch her throat work as she takes me in. My tongue traces over my incisors. Hunger rushes through me, down past my stomach and into my loins.

I know then that I'm going to have this woman. I'm going to have her repeatedly. I'm going to have her thoroughly. And she will be begging.

"You're a bastard, you know that?"

I do know that. But it's for entirely different reasons than she could ever fathom.

"You've taken my sister," she continues. "And now my business."

"*Minou*, I haven't touched your *business*. You'll be screaming my name when I do."

"I would've fixed it."

There's a break in her voice that makes me stop and pay attention. The stern look on her face changes, and some of the strength leaves her. I have the urge to prop her up. I don't like Marechal Durand weakened and broken. Not unless it's by my hand.

"I raised Cari all by myself after our mother died. And you and your brother have just taken her from me."

"Cari and Hadrian are just on their honeymoon. They will return." Reassuring a woman is not my strong suit, and I'm not sure I'm doing a fair job of it here.

"I've been running the day to day of my family's wine business since I was fifteen. I brought it back from the brink while my father grieved our mother. I would've brought it back again. But you've taken that from me."

Now I am clueless as to what we are talking about. That happens often with me when I'm engaged in a conversation with a woman that has nothing to do with sex.

"Don't act innocent," Marechal hisses.

"I'm anything but innocent. But I don't have any idea what you mean about your business. What is happening? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"I've never needed a man to come in and save me. I'm no damsel."

No, Marechal Durand definitely isn't the passive princess type. She is a warrior. A woman it would take a calculated assault to break down. I much prefer that type of strength to a female in distress.

"I would've covered the debts. I would've brought Durand back. I would've handled it all."

"I don't doubt it," I say.

Marechal blinks at me as though she doesn't believe my words. It would appear this strong woman has the weight of the world on her shoulders—at least the weight of acres of

a vineyard, and a family that doesn't seem to appreciate her load.

I reach my hand out. Her breath catches on my thumb as I tilt her chin up. I lift her proud head until her eyes are gazing directly into mine. I know now that I'll need to tug a little harder to bend her to my will.

"Come, Marechal," I command.

Her lips part. I get a sneak peek at the rosé of the flesh there. Her full lips are plumper than a grape. I content myself with the knowledge that I'll soon be sinking my teeth into them.

"Come now, it's time to rest."

Marechal's lids droop, hiding the ripe plum of her dark irises. In another second, she is in my arms. I lift her form with ease as I walk out of the cellar.

"Don't worry, *minou*. I'll take care of everything."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gaius

“WHERE IS SHE? Is she still here? Is she hurt? Did I hurt her?”

I stand in the doorway as I watch Hadrian pull his bride close. Cari’s fangs are out and dripping even as her gaze is troubled. The bruising on her upper arms where Hadrian must have held her back is fast fading. There are rips in her sundress, exposing the chest of her honeyed skin, skin so much like her sister’s. Though my fangs don’t ache at the sight of my new sister-in-law’s bared flesh.

“It’s all right,” Hadrian soothes, tucking Cari under his chin. There are scratches on his face and forearms, no doubt delivered by his newly-turned bride. His bruises are fading even faster than Cari’s, the struggle of a moment ago forgotten. “You didn’t get anywhere near her.”

Cari buries her head at Hadrian’s heart. Just days ago, Hadrian clawed at his chest to feed a dying Cari the lifeblood from his heart. It’s the best way to turn a new

vampire. It was the first and only time any of my brothers have done it.

We all watched Domitia turn young boys, countless times. We never discussed it out loud, but silently we had all sworn never to make another of our kind. But that was because we'd only seen it done to enslave or gain power. We'd never seen it done for love.

There is a pang in my chest as I watch the two of them together. I don't understand the feeling. I've watched Hadrian with Domitia many times. Our sire enjoyed having the two of us inside her at the same time.

I do not miss those ménages, mainly because the sexual escapades broke Hadrian a little each time she forced him into them. Which, of course, was why Domitia insisted on them. The demoness couldn't get off if there wasn't pain involved: preferably another's pain.

So no, I feel no love for my sire. More than anything, I want her out of my nightmares so whatever tightness I feel in my chest isn't from thoughts of her.

"I can't believe I almost attacked my own sister," Cari whimpers. "I smelled her blood and I couldn't stop myself. If you hadn't been there..."

"Shhh," Hadrian hushes her. "Gaius sent her off the property. She's safe and sound."

"She's not gone," I say, pouring myself a glass of blood-tinged wine. "She's in my bed."

Hadrian and Cari turn blazing eyes on me. Cari's fangs elongate once more as her eyes dart frantically around the dining room. Hadrian's fists clench as he glares at me.

"I put her down for a nap."

"Why would you do that?" demands Hadrian.

Why indeed? We have a few workers on the vineyard, shifters we use to work for us during the daylight hours. One of them could've driven Marechal home. But the thought of someone else touching her, the thought of her

being beyond my grasp, made those same muscles clench in my chest.

"You know Cari is in a fragile state. Why would you keep her sister here?"

"I don't know, brother." I down the glass of sanguine wine; the iron and alcohol go straight to my head. "Why did you buy the Durand vineyard debts?"

Hadrian's fingers unclench. He jerks his head away from me, but not before I hear the curse under his breath.

"You what?" Cari's fangs flash again. "Hadrian, is this true? Did you do some sort of hostile takeover of my family's business?"

Hadrian takes a deep breath. He sinks his fang into his lower lip, as though he is mulling over the right words to say. Having known the man for centuries, I know that he is carefully crafting a lie. Having known the man for just a couple of weeks, it would appear his new bride is wise to his ways, as well.

"You asshole," Cari hisses. "You can boss me around in the bedroom. But if you want to try it in any other room, especially when it comes to my family, you're gonna get a rude surprise. Especially once my sister wakes up."

I chuckle at that. I've been on the receiving end of Marechal Durand, the boss businesswoman. I know a weaker man would've cowered. That iron maiden attitude only serves to make my dick hard. I wanted to bend her over her office desk and lick her from her toes to her clit.

"The vineyard was drowning in debt," says Hadrian. "Lucius Frangelico was about to purchase it."

I wasn't aware of either of those two details. We have made peace with the vampire king, but I don't want him sniffing anywhere near Marechal. I move from my post on the wall, coming to stand at Hadrian's side.

"Marechal's going to lose her shit when she finds out," says Cari.

"She already has," I say. "That's what she was doing here."

Now it's Cari who cringes. "Did she bite your head off?"

"She tried." I grin. "Luckily, she's not the one with fangs."

Cari flashes me her fangs with a toothy grin. Her features are so like Marechal's that the vision of a tight-bunned, stern-faced vampiress glaring down at me makes my dick weep with want.

"Hadrian, you shouldn't have gotten into my family's business without consulting me," says Cari. "I know the vineyard was in some trouble, but you should've let Marechal handle it. Marechal always handles it."

Something about that statement irks me. I think back to Marechal's relaxed posture as she'd lain with her foot bound in a knot of rope. And then again when she'd come face to face with the suspension toys in the dungeon. For a woman who always handles everything, Marechal Durand desperately needs someone to take her in hand.

"You're already on her bastard list for running off and marrying me," Cari says. "Now you've taken her business from her. You are not going to win brother-in-law of the year anytime this decade."

"Luckily, we have a lifetime," says Hadrian.

"But what are we going to do today?" Cari says. "She definitely hates you now."

"I'll handle it," I say.

"You?" says Hadrian. "She already doesn't like you."

I scoff at that. But then Cari nods in agreement.

"Well, you are exactly the kind of man she dislikes," says Cari.

"Charming, well dressed, cultured?"

"A ladies' man who is now her boss," says Cari. "Just know that if you try to change anything about the business she's run for over a decade, she will make your life miserable."

“Why would I change anything? Your sister is brilliant at what she does.”

I’ve been keeping track of the Durand Vineyards for decades now. Their signature wine is an elegant nod to the classic vintages. Though I’m not one for blends and hybrids, I can’t deny the innovations their vintners are making. This past week, I learned that the head vintner is Marechal.

“Yeah, she’s brilliant, and she knows it.” Cari smiles proudly, her hunger all but forgotten. Then those Chianti-colored eyes of hers sparkle. “Hey, if you two get together, you can turn her and we can all be one big happy family.”

My mouth goes slack. I might want to fuck Cari’s sister, but I don’t do relationships or monogamy. Hell, I am rarely willing to commit enough to actually stick my cock in a woman’s cunt. Down her throat? Sure, if she behaves. Between her tits? Yeah, if she’s lucky.

But I’m not about to tell Cari that. Luckily, my brother comes to my aid.

“That’s not going to happen,” says Hadrian. “Gaius never wears the same socks twice, much less keeps the same woman.”

I want to protest. That isn’t entirely true. I’ve been playing at the club most nights this past week, and came home wearing yesterday’s socks at least twice.

“We’ve talked about this,” Hadrian goes on. “If Marechal finds out what you’ve become, we’ll need to wipe her mind, like we did your brother. That didn’t go so well.”

Arneis Durand was in the same accident that had nearly cost Cari her life. Hadrian saved him by giving him a taste of his healing blood. Then I wiped the man’s mind.

I don’t want to tamper with Marechal’s mind. I like the fight in her. What I want is her submission. Now that I am her boss, I could have a taste of it.

CHAPTER NINE

*M*arechal

I'M NOT USUALLY a good sleeper. Dreams are always thin wisps to me. When I wake, I can never truly hold on to what I'd been dreaming about.

Not so this time.

I feel each braid of the rope against my ankles. The twines loop around my thighs, curling up over my torso and binding my hands to the Saint Andrew's Cross at the center of the wine cellar. I hear the whisper of the flogger's tresses as they are dragged on the floor. Each hum of the tails sends a shiver along my thighs that urges me to clench my ass.

But I can't move. I am bound, held still, and awaiting his command.

The sound of his footfalls is a booming drumbeat in my ears as he steps onto the scene. His presence mutes the light of the glowing candles. Each flame leans towards him, drawn as though the wicks are the moths and he is fire.

His jet black hair falls across his forehead, shading his dark gaze from me. His tongue snakes out of his mouth and

licks at his lower lip. Again, I feel the need to clench. But this time it isn't my ass that needs to grip at something.

The channel between my legs is desperate for something to fill it. It's a feeling that is foreign to me. I lost my virginity in high school. I can't even remember the boy's last name, or his face. It wasn't memorable. Nor were any of the few times I had sex after that.

Sex was simply a chore that came with having a boyfriend. When I realized that having a boyfriend didn't serve my bottom line, I stopped the practice, and saw that I had no need for sex. It had never been memorable, anyway.

But watching Gaius handle a flogger while I'm strapped and bound to a cross makes my lady bits sit up and pay attention. Even in a dream.

As I'd felt when I was caught by the rope and he'd loomed over me, there is a weightlessness that settles over my captive shoulders. I feel free, even though I can't escape. I can't remember a single worry from my life.

More than anything, I want to stay asleep, in this dream. The relief of hanging here, waiting for Gaius to make a move, is heaven.

He lifts his gaze to my face. My back arches off the cross, my breasts strain to him, the nipples going harder than pebbles.

His hand rises. The tails of the flogger murmur with a hum of excitement as the twirls shift in his hand.

I need to press my thighs together but know that I will get no relief. I know that only his hands wielding that device will be the thing that does it. Which is strange. I have never had an orgasm before. I doubt any woman has ever had one. It's a farce made up by the porn industry. If Meg Ryan can fake one on cue then it can't be real.

Still, it is nice to dream. It is nice to be aroused. It is nice to explore my secret fantasies in the comfort of my depraved mind. I have never let my curiosity about the world of BDSM be known to anyone.

Well, except for one boyfriend. But when he'd tried to comply with my wishes and given me a light, chuckling swat on the butt, I dumped him the next day and never spoke of it again.

Back in the wine cellar that was actually a sex dungeon, Gaius Serrano looked like he knew exactly how to use a flogger. He probably knew how to tie a woman to a cross, since he'd been so adept at unraveling me from the knot earlier.

But this will only ever be a dream. A dream I can't afford to keep having. There is too much work to do, and I have to get up and do it.

The moment I open my eyes, all the pressures slam back into me. My hands aren't bound, they are free to pick up the mantle left to me by my parents. My feet aren't restricted, they can carry the load on my shoulders and get my family out of this latest mess.

I know there are bills to deal with, a payroll total that I can't meet, berries that need looking after, equipment that needs fixing, a brother who is unwell, a sister to find, and now an Italian family to wrestle my business back from.

Is Gaius Italian? I've caught a lilting French accent every now and again. He certainly doesn't know French well. The word for kitten is *minette*. So why does he keep calling me *minou*?

Italian, French, or whatever, I'll deal with him... Just as soon as I figure out where I am.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. The first thing I notice is that I am not in my bed. I'm not in my room. The sheets I'm lying on are softer than a newly sprung grape leaf. I'm in a four-poster bed that looks like it grew from the roots of a tree. It smells of old oak and fresh earth.

Not a single light is on in the room. It is lit by candles, and the wicks all lean towards one corner of the room. I know instinctively who is looming in the shadows.

“Mr. Serrano?”

I sit up in the bed, thankful that I am still clothed. The only thing that has been taken from me are my shoes. I see them sitting on the side table.

“What am I doing here?” I demand.

“You fell ill.” His voice is like honeyed wine: sweet on the way down, but the burn comes later in the throat. “I brought you inside to rest.”

That doesn’t sound like me. I’ve never taken ill a day in my life. I’ve been far too busy.

“You’ve been working yourself to the bone, Ms. Durand,” he says. “There’s no longer a need for that.”

“And so it begins? Now that you’ve purchased my family’s business, you think you’ll tell me what to do?”

Gaius’s grin spreads as he separates himself from the shadows. The flames catch on a flash of white teeth. My heartbeat kicks up. I feel like prey that’s been cornered, and am now being played with before the eating begins.

“I’ve spoken with Hadrian. He purchased the vineyard’s debts as a wedding present to Cari. He has no interest in running the business or interfering in any way.”

That should be good news. But the fist around my heart does not loosen. Instead, I feel more stress pressing down on my shoulders.

“When it comes to winemaking, Ms. Durand, I know that you are the best. I would not deign to tell you how to run your vineyard.”

He takes a step towards me. The sound of his heel impacting the hardwood of the floor is the same drumbeat from my dream.

“In your labs, you will maintain complete control,” he continues.

Another step closer. My heartbeat kicks up. Again, I feel as though this man is a beast prowling towards me. But me, being me, I do not back down.

"You will have control over your staff and the finances. I assume it was your father and brother who mismanaged funds?"

I do not answer. My father is blameless in my eyes. He'd lost the woman he'd loved. He was never quite right after my mother died. I did what I could to keep us afloat. I was so busy with the day to day that I did not notice we were drowning.

I am so busy in my reverie that I failed to notice that Gaius has come upon me. He rests a hand on my bare calf. I shudder at the contact. I look down to see that he is focusing on the markings on my leg, left by the rope. Though I do not have pale skin, my flesh bruises easily. That mark won't fade until tomorrow.

"You are in complete control, *minou*. I am only here to offer you a hand where you may need it."

His voice is hypnotic. If I were a weaker woman, I'd be under his spell. But I am me, so I cock my head to the side and give him a pitying look.

"I don't need your hand. What I need is the controlling interest in my company back."

Once again, a slow grin spreads across his handsome face. I can't take my eyes off his lips as they stretch from plump and biteable to thin and wicked. Kissing was the only thing I'd enjoyed in my dating life.

That, and being held. But none of my partners had had the strong, thick arms of Gaius Serrano. I bet he could hold me tight. Carry me, even. But that's something I'll never know. I'll never allow myself to get close enough to him to find out. That wicked grin might be dangerous to some women; it is lost on me.

"Name your price," I say.

His brows lift. The move is a challenge. I have no idea what he's about to say, what price he'll name. But whatever it is, I'm willing to pay it to get my family's company back.

"My price is an orgasm."

I blink slowly. But as my lids lower, I realize the mistake in that. It would be dangerous to have this man out of my sight even for the blink of an eye.

“I beg your pardon?” I say.

“My price. It’s an orgasm.”

CHAPTER TEN

Gaius

“YOU’RE A PIG.”

That’s Marechal’s response once she finds her voice again. I note that it is not a *no*. I also note that her nostrils flare, her breath quickens, and her thighs press together. That is all the answer I need to press forward.

“You do know that pigs are used to find truffles,” I say, “those rare, delicious treats.”

Marechal sits at the top of the mattress. I remain at the bottom of the bed. My hand is stretched across the sea of memory foam between us. My fingers still graze her calf, feeling the indentations left by the ropes.

The fact that she hasn’t yanked her leg away also tells me what I need to know about her true desires. Marechal Durand might be in charge in the business world, but in the bedroom, she is completely out of touch with her needs.

“You do know that a truffle hog can’t actually eat the fruit it unearths,” she says.

I throw back my head and laugh at this. She is a delight. It's been a long time since I've had to work for it. I'm going to enjoy the hell out of making this woman submit to me.

She finally notices my hand on her leg. She pulls her calf away, tucking it under her but not rising from the bed. Confusion and anger mar her face. Clearly, her mind knows she should flee, but her body wants to stay.

"You once said that there was no such thing as an orgasm," I say while maintaining my distance from her on the bed.

"It's a scientific fact based on many research studies." Marechal's tone is once again haughty, and no longer breathless. She rises from the mattress and collects her shoes, sliding one heel on at a time. "Ninety-five percent of men experience a pleasurable spasm of the loins, whereas less than twenty-five percent of women report experiencing any such release during intercourse. You simply can't argue with science, Mr. Serrano."

"Not going to argue, Ms. Durand. I simply would like to try an alternative method to see if we can arrive at a different result."

"I am not having sex with you to take back my family business." She stands proud in the center of my bedroom. With her heels back on, it's as though she's regained her superpower. Her shoulders are back, her head is high. Her hands are even on her hips in the akimbo pose of a superhero. She is Wonder Woman in a business skirt, no cape needed.

"I would never make you do anything against your will," I say, leaning back against the bedpost, allowing my gaze to take her in.

She smirks as though there's no way that I could make her do anything she didn't want to. Little does she know. It would be better for her if I had no interest in making her crawl to me. Now that I have that image in my mind, I know I will edge this woman mercilessly, bringing her to the brink

of pleasure and then pulling her back. Over and over again I'll push her, until her back arches off the bed and she lands in a puddle of bliss at my feet.

Some protective instinct inside her must see my intentions because she takes a step back.

"I don't want to fuck you," I say, as I rise from the bed.

She hesitates. Uncertainty is clear in her dark, plum eyes. She winces. Was that perhaps a ding to her feminine pride?

"But your money is no good with me, either."

"So what exactly do you want?"

"Your pleasure. Give me five minutes of your time. If I can't bring you to experience this elusive idea known as the female release, then I'll hand over half of the Durand shares my family just purchased."

Her eyes flash. I can't tell if it's from the possibility of receiving pleasure, or the potential for getting half the shares back. My bet would be on the latter.

"Five minutes." I hold up my hand, fingers splayed. "I keep my pants on. You keep your skirt on."

"Then how will you..." She waves her hand between us, her honey-gold cheeks flushing to amber.

"You let me worry about that, *minou*."

Her fingers curl into a fist. She is considering it. Not that I doubted she would.

"Why do you want this?" she asks.

I decide on the truth. "You're a strong woman, Marechal. Smart—brilliant, actually. Capable. I simply want your attention."

"You had my attention when you instituted a hostile takeover of my life's work."

"I'll give it back if I can't bring you pleasure. What do you have to lose?"

"What do you get if you can... do it?"

"If I can do it then you'll let me do it again."

Marechal tugs at her bottom lip as she's thinking this over. I know it's already a done deal. I can scent her arousal. She needs this, and by the Fates, I want to be the man to give it to her. Again, and then again. So much so that my patience is starting to wane.

As the seconds tick by, I fight to hold myself very still. I want to throw her back on the bed, strap her down, and take her clit between my teeth. There would be nothing she could do about it. And I know without a doubt that I would bring her pleasure enough to make her forget anything but my name.

"How long did you say?"

The beast inside of me stirs. I have to swallow down my eagerness to have this woman. I also struggle to keep to the original time. "Five minutes."

Marechal takes a deep breath. Slowly, her hands slide down her skirt, evening out nonexistent wrinkles. Her heels clack as she walks to the bed and takes a seat.

I uncuff my shirt and roll up my sleeve. With my forearm bare, I turn my wrist until the face of my Rolex is visible to both of us. With sure fingers, I set the timer.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*M*arechal

Is this what a prostitute feels like? At least they would receive a cash benefit for their troubles. There is no guarantee that I will reap the reward I'm willing to give up my virtue for.

I've already given up so much for my family and this business. What's this one more thing? It's not like I actually believe in the female orgasm. I can lie on my back while he fumbles around in my lady bits. It'll basically be like a visit to the OBGYN. If it takes playing doctor with an infantile, grown man to win back what I've worked so hard for all my life, it will be worth it. I'll just have to lie back and think of the vineyard.

The workday is over, but there's still a ton to do when I get back home. That's a casualty of sleeping where you work. I try to recall the mountain of paperwork I have to go through when I get back. There will be bills, invoices, and sales reports, not to mention added payroll now that the nighttime harvest is underway.

Though each time I try to mentally call up a task and add it to the list, the thought goes hazy. My attention wanders, meandering down long, curved lines of fresh vines until I am back here. In this room. With this man.

Gaius hasn't touched me. He hasn't touched himself, either, the possibility of which had been another of my concerns. He simply gazes at me.

What? Does he think he can make me spontaneously combust with just that smoldering glance? The asshole. He probably does think that.

So why do I feel my nipples going hard as he looks down my body? Why do my thighs press together as he cocks his head to peer down? My heels click together like I'm Dorothy, ready to fly home from Oz. The clicking sound reminds me that I'm doing this so that I can get my home back.

Tick, tick, tick. The only other sound in the room is that of Gaius's watch. He's wasted at least thirty seconds in this staring contest. He's got less than four and a half minutes left.

The bed shakes as he steps closer to me. He hasn't taken a seat on the mattress. He's still standing. I realize the reason the bed is shaking is because of me.

I have no idea what is happening to me. I must be out of my mind. My brain is only clear when I look at him. My body tingles and tightens with just a glance from him. And now my limbs are trembling, and he hasn't even touched me.

And then he does.

Surprisingly, I don't jump when his fingertips graze my calf. He touches the center of my right shin, the part where it is more bone than flesh. I shaved last night but I'm so sensitive that I can feel the millimeter's worth of growth itching for more of his touch.

His touch is pleasant, but definitely not enough to delude me into a real or imagined inner muscle spasm. I say

nothing to dissuade or encourage Gaius. Time is ticking as he moves slowly. Right now, the second's hand is on my side.

Gaius's index finger dips behind my knee. My leg jerks straight on the mattress. The movement causes my back to arch. A low cauldron of heat is starting to burn at the base of my spine. A hum of sensation slowly radiates outward, encircling my hips.

My eyes are half-lidded. I wrench them open wide to see that his gaze is on my face, not on what he's doing. In the dim light of the room, his smirk is muted. He smiles faintly, just a curl at the left corner of his mouth.

Why isn't he trying to look up my skirt? Why is he so focused on my face? His gaze darts from my eyes to my mouth. He even takes one of his precious seconds to glance at my nose.

My nostrils flare under his perusal. In an effort to lower the flagging flesh there, I swallow, only to have to swallow again, and then again. My mouth is watering as his fingers trace a slow path to my inner thigh.

It's no longer just the pointed beacon of his index finger. The thick pad of his thumb draws lazy circles on my flesh as the long length of his middle finger leads the charge.

Onward. Upward. His hands climb.

My lower back continues to arch off the mattress. No matter how deeply I breathe, it won't relax back down. That cauldron of warmth in my hips has burned a path around to the front of me and is stoking embers there.

What is happening? Is it possible? Am I going to lose this wager?

Without any preamble or warning, Gaius pulls his hand away. Not entirely. He rests the full weight of his palm on my inner thigh. If he stretched out his long fingers, he would brush the edges of my sex. Instead of reaching out, he bends down.

I prepare myself to recoil from his advance. But he comes no closer to me. He simply goes down to his knees.

On the floor. Not the bed.

The way he's arranged his form puts him on eye level with me. Still, somehow, it feels as though he continues to loom over me. He kneels on the floor as though he's praying for me. Or mourning me at my sickbed. Both images have validity.

A few seconds ago, I was ready to call out for a lord and savior over what this man was making me feel. Just the thought of it must mean I'm mentally disturbed, and might benefit from some time in the looney bin.

There are two minutes left on the clock.

Less than a moment ago, I thought he just might be able to introduce me to some form of pleasure in the sexual act. Now, with less than half the time left, I know I'm about to win this bet. As soon as I think the thought, my hips jackknife off the bed.

"S'intaller, minou."

Settle down? How can I settle down with his fingers tracing the lining of my thong? His touch is light but it is eliciting a reaction that I am not in control of.

I don't know if I'm unsettled by the intimate touch of his fingers, or the out of control jerking of my limbs. I'm not a woman prone to be anything but in control. I don't know how to react. I don't know how to think.

Apparently, I'm not thinking. My mind is empty of anything except sparks of pleasure. My breasts ache. My belly is trembling. There is a pressure building at the core of me.

And then he stops.

His hand is still under my skirt. Looking down, I can see the outline of his knuckles beneath the fabric. They are less than an inch away from where I want him to be, where I know I need him to be. I want to scream in frustration, but I don't dare give him the satisfaction.

Plus, I need to win. He has less than a minute left in this game he's playing. It's a game he has no hope of winning.

But I'm starting to wonder if that was his aim.

When he touches me again, his index and middle finger land on the plumpest part of my thong. The area is soaking wet, and for a moment, I worry I've embarrassed myself. That area has only ever been this wet when I've gone to the bathroom. But my bladder is empty. All that moisture came from somewhere else inside me.

With a flick of his thumb, Gaius rubs at the crest of my sex. The skin there is engorged. It throbs under his touch, instantly soaking the top part of my underwear. My mind blanks as that cauldron inside of me blazes ever higher.

The wetness pouring out of my sex is like gasoline. It covers my entire mons. It spills into the cracks between my sex and my thighs. One more flick of his fingers and the match will ignite, burning me alive in a blaze of pleasure.

I hold my breath, preparing to be pulled under its heat, to be buried alive in the flames. I can already hear the fire truck's alarm blaring its warning.

But no. That's not an emergency vehicle. It is the alarm clock.

Time is up.

Gaius pulls his hand from beneath my skirt and sits back on his haunches. "Ah, Ms. Durand, it looks as though I've lost."

He doesn't sound contrite. He doesn't sound sorry. He looks at me with that same smile as when he made this deal: patient, predatory, waiting to pounce. He's taken a chunk out of me, and I didn't realize it until it was too late.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gaius

I BRING my hand to my mouth as we eye each other. Slowly, I extend my index finger and take a languid lick. I just barely keep myself from moaning. I've eaten a lot of cunny in my many centuries. They are much like the different taste profiles of wine.

Some women have firm, bitter cunts, like a glass of red. They are best served warm, after riding a sex toy or the tails of my flogger for a long time.

Then there are the females with the crisp, tart taste of white wine. Best to finger fuck their G-spots hard and repeatedly to increase the zest in their juices.

Women who tend to blush frequently fall somewhere in the middle, like a rosé. They are perfect for a quick snack, as it doesn't take much to get them off and get the essence flowing.

Marechal is none of the above. She is like an aged port or sherry, a sweet dessert wine that's so light and airy that before you realize it, you've downed the glass. When you go

to stand, you stumble and see that you've gone punch drunk.

I stand now, carefully putting my feet under me. I can't let her see how much she's affected me. That would ruin the game I'm playing with her.

Her body still trembles from the release I denied her. Her dark eyes are saucers of disbelief. I'm moderately surprised her nipples haven't sliced through the silk of her blouse.

I've only tasted a few vintages such as her. Those women, I kept around for some time. I know then, as I flick my tongue under my fingernail, that I will be going back for more. And the next time it will be for a direct hit of her juices.

It's rare that I drink from the same pussy more than once. Why bother, when humans and shifters are so plentiful and at the ready? In the last few decades, I haven't sipped from the same neck or femoral artery twice.

I haven't fucked a woman in that long either.

Oh, I've had them suck me off. But the thought of getting lost in a woman's body is anathema to me—likely because the last woman I properly fucked liked to dig her claws into my balls and watch them bleed. Even with Domitia gone, I preferred to keep my dick to myself unless I was shoving it deep down a submissive's throat.

On the bed, Marechal parts her lips. My dick stands to attention, wanting into that orifice. *S'intaller*, I tell it. We will both have what we want soon. Likely within the next five minutes.

"I trust the shares will be transferred over into my name by the opening of business tomorrow?" Her tone is clipped, businesslike once more.

Marechal sits up, surprisingly elegant even though I've rucked up her skirt. She carefully places both feet on the ground. The stems of her heels knock against the floor, but the sound is not an invitation to come inside.

“Of course,” I say, matching her professional tone.

She nods. Her shoulders are erect, back straight, head high. But she won’t meet my eyes. Somehow she’s looking down her nose at me without looking directly at me. Her haughty attitude only serves to want me to make her beg even harder.

“I’ll have the paperwork drawn up tonight,” I say, straightening out my shirt and refastening my cuff. “You’ll have forty-five percent ownership of your company.”

Her gaze flashes to mine in the light of that math. There’s a tick in her jaw. I can hear her molars grind. There is a tremble in her pinky finger—a slight one, but it’s there. Any other woman would be on her knees, thighs parted, palms up, waiting for my command. Not this one.

Marechal Durand is the strongest woman I’ve met in a lifetime. I crave to see her back bend, to break that iron will of hers until her pussy is putty in the palm of my hands. Working Marechal Durand up is fast becoming my new favorite pastime. I’m sure the pleasure will only be surpassed by working her over.

“For now.” The two words are clipped. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Serrano. I’ll be going home now.”

Her heels are the sounds of war drums as they impact the floor. My ears twitch as they catch a hint of the slickness on her inner thighs. If not for those thick stems on her vintage shoes, Marechal would be sliding across the floor.

She moves quickly past me, giving me a delectable view of her backside. Fuck, if I can’t wait to bend her over my knee. But she’s almost out the door.

“Wait!”

Her heels come to a screeching halt. They’ve probably left a mark on my pristine floor. Marechal turns, giving me a wary glare. Damn, can the woman arch an eyebrow.

“What?” Her tone could cut glass. The cool breeze rolling off her shoulders does nothing to dampen my hard-on.

“You promised to look at my vines.”

Her gaze dips to my crotch. There’s no problem with that particular vine. It is hard and eager for her attention. Very soon, I’ll place it on her tongue for her to suckle.

She parts those lush lips in what I know will be a refusal. But before she can utter a word, I hold out my hands, arms outstretched, as though to show there is nothing up my sleeves.

“Just because I lost our friendly wager...” I begin.

Both her brows go sky high at that. I hold up my palms to show they are empty, even though I can still scent her sweet smell on my fingers.

“I didn’t think you’d hold your winning and my failing over my head.”

Now her mouth gapes open, but only for a second before she slams it shut. That dark plum gaze narrows on me with suspicion. Fates, when’s the last time I’ve had such an intelligent, discerning woman?

“I would appreciate you taking a look at my vine, as a professional courtesy,” I say. “Surely you can give me another moment of your time.”

The breath she lets out is low and shaky. Can she sense I threw that bet? Does she recognize that I had her in the palm of my hand, literally? It’s been so long since I’ve played a game of catch and release. Usually, women throw themselves at me for the release they know I can give.

“I’ll grab a sample on my way out,” she says.

It’s not what I wanted. But this is the pattern with her. I incline my head to her. She turns on her heel and makes a dash for the door. I let her go.

Let her think to herself that she isn’t already on my hook. Her gait isn’t the confident stride it usually is. Her pussy is aching for me, aching for release. Soon enough, I’ll catch her. Then I’ll dangle her on the line until she begs for mercy.

I'll just have to keep our tryst from Cari, which in turn means keeping it from Hadrian. Despite the pretty family picture my new sister-in-law painted earlier, I don't do relationships. Marechal is going to be a lovely distraction. But only for a few days.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*M*arechal

THERE IS no distinction between dreaming and waking. My body hums from a fitful rest to an energized alertness. Like a vine greeting the new day's sun, I unfurl my arms and stretch my limbs. As I stretch the length of my body, I don't hear the usual snap, crackle, and pop of tired tendons. Where I do feel the weight is in my core.

A tingle persists between my thighs. A throb of need that I have never experienced before. Because I'd never known what I'd been missing.

Last night, Gaius Serrano brought me out from under a deep, dark cave. He brought me down a long, dim hallway with lights on either wall flaring to life with each of his guiding steps. At the end of the corridor, I spied the first ray of sunlight. The rays reached out to me, beckoning me to me with their warmth. I hadn't even known I was cold until that moment. Before I could touch the glass panes of the window, Gaius pulled the curtains closed.

This morning, daylight streams into my open curtains. The full force of the sun's light captures my face. I'm still

burrowed under the comforter. Yet somehow, I am left cold. When I press my thighs together, the ache there persists.

Last night wasn't the first time a man put his hands down my panties. Back in high school, Wally O'Neal's efforts had been pointless and embarrassing. Or, rather, pointed and uncomfortable. The man's fingernails had been longer than mine. He was a much better Dungeon Master and aspiring wand wielder than he was a lover.

Sex hadn't interested me much after that. I'd had sex with my college boyfriend, Jordan Riley. He wasn't a college student, though. He was my professor, one of the world's foremost oenologists. The man was brilliant when it came to the study of ancient wines. I could listen to him wax philosophical for hours about the fermentation of rice in Predynastic China. His theories would be all I thought about during his two-minute pumping action between my legs. After he rolled over and fell asleep, I'd pull my panties back on and get my kicks reading his research notes.

When Gaius put his fingers on me, my mind blanked into a pure blackness of bliss, punctuated by tiny starbursts of light that promised a big explosion.

Would he want to do it again? That is a stupid question. I know he would. Handsome, rich men like to play power games. The real question is: would I let him play me?

As of now, I have forty-five percent of my family's company back in my grasp. Gaius still holds the controlling amount. What would I have to let him do to me to get another six percent?

A sheen of sweat coats my forehead at the thought. I jerk the covers off me. My bare feet crash down onto the cold floor, shocking some sense back into me.

That was a one-time event. I've spent all my life having to prove my intelligence and capability in a man's world. I will use my head to get the rest of the shares back.

With a purposeful inhale, I push myself up off the bed. I go through my morning necessities and then get dressed.

I pull on a bra, but the silky lace feels too rough on my breasts. The matching panty set feels tight at my thighs; the material brushes against my swollen core, and I ache. I pull on a tight skirt, hoping it will help keep me together. All it does is make me feel confined, make me feel the need to step out of it. Instead, I slip on a pair of six-inch heels—entirely impractical for the walk I have to do in the field today, but the shoes make me feel powerful.

I leave my room and head for my lab. Stepping up to the open window there, I can see the entire vineyard. The sight of even rows of green that stretch on for miles settles something in me. Staring at the uniformity is what finally cools the ache between my legs. My shoulders straighten. My tits lift, but not because of any man. It's because of all that I have built.

With the yield of this season's harvest, I know I'll have enough to buy back the last six shares to retake control of my business. Gaius said he wasn't interested in my money, but I'm willing to offer the entire profit if it'll put me back in control of my destiny.

On my desk is a wilting vine. The color of the leaves is not any of the Durand's signature berries. Nor are they one of my hybrid blends.

Then I remember; this is the vine I took from the Serrano vineyard before I left. At the roots are the telltale white spots to indicate rot. But there's more.

The green leaves are discolored with splotches of red. In some places, there are raised pockmarks along the veins. I place the specimen under a microscope to get a better look. What I see there doesn't make sense.

Grapevines are tough plants. They can survive cold winter storms, an invasion of pests and, in some cases, flooding. The Serrano vine looks like it's been through each of these catastrophes all at once—when not a single one of those instances has happened in this valley.

A light tap on the exterior door brings my head up. Zahara stands in the open door. Her gaze is cast down as she waits for me to acknowledge her. Before I do, I glance up at the clock. It's well after lunchtime. I'm shocked to see that I've been examining this vine for hours.

"Yes, Zahara, please come in."

She shuffles into my lab. As she nears my desk, her hand rises. I take the slip of paper she offers. On the document, I see her carefully written script detailing the date, hours worked last night, and the number of workers. It's a larger number of people than I expected.

"We're not trying to cheat you, Ms. Durand."

"I didn't think you were."

"Times are hard back home," she says. "Jobs are scarce. That's why there are more of us this year."

Zahara's blouse slips off her shoulder, revealing brown skin and a red, raised pockmark. The bruise looks similar to the disease on the plants, but in a straight line and close together. Like the swipe of fingernails.

"Are you okay, Zahara?"

Her gaze lifts to meet mine. She blinks as she searches my face. Whatever she's looking for, she doesn't find it, because she pulls up the loose fabric to cover the mark.

"I'm ready to work," she says. "With more of my cousins here, we should get the harvest done in half the time."

It's clear she's not willing to talk to me about her bruise. I have a mind to fire all of the new males she's brought with her, starting with the misogynist from yesterday. Instead, I unlock the safe where I keep the cash for the day workers. I hand her the money noted on the invoice. Then I tug a few more bills loose, slipping them into her blouse where I saw the wound.

I realize too late that the move, even between two women, might have crossed a line. But Zahara doesn't flinch. She holds my gaze as she retrieves the money I stuffed down her shirt and hands it back to me.

"I don't do handouts, Ms. Durand."

Color stains my cheeks. I want to tell her that's not what that was. I don't want to give her a hand. I want to give her the ability to run if she needs to.

"It's not for your hands," I say. "It's for your feet, in case you need to get away."

The same small smile from yesterday plays on her lips. "History tells me never to take a gift from a colonizer."

"My family wasn't part of that. I'm second-generation French-American."

Zahara nods, but she still doesn't take the money. Her gaze is on the vine on the table. "I hear there are new owners at the Palmezzo Vineyard?"

I take a deep breath. On the exhale, I try to let go of my need to save this woman who is not ready to be saved. "It doesn't look like they'll be harvesting this year. Their vines are sick."

Zahara's head cants to the side as she regards the vine. There's a spark of clarity in her intelligent gaze.

"Have you seen vine rot like this before, Zahara? Where there is no internal problem, yet the vine is still sick?"

"No." She shakes her head slowly. "But I have heard tales of it."

"What tales?"

"The land upon which that vineyard sits once belonged to my people."

I knew that bit of history. Arizona has the second-largest percentage of Native Americans in America. Over a quarter of the area of the state is reservation land.

Zahara's mother was a descendant of the Mayan. Her father was a descendant of the Tohono O'odham tribe that once lived and toiled on these lands before the Europeans came. Her grandfather moved their family to Mexico shortly after my grandfather bought this land. They made the trek across the border every year to work the land that once was theirs.

I now realize I'm not sure which branch of her people she is referring to. The indigenous people of Central America? Or the native inhabitants of North America? Would it be racially insensitive of me to ask? I'm not sure, so I just listen.

"The stories state that my people angered the god of the underworld. The god made it so that nothing would grow atop the soil until his ire was appeased."

"How would the god's ire be appeased?"

"When the Night Son greets the dawn."

I had been taken in by her tale, but now I frown. "Night sun? That makes no sense."

"Of course it doesn't, Ms. Durand. It's just a myth."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gaius

IF IT WERE MY CHOICE, I'd stay awake all day. I have no desire to walk into the sun, I just want to be awake in it. But each night, as the moon goes down each night, it compels the children of the night to go down with it. At my age, I can stay up a little later each sunrise, and wake a little earlier each sunset.

My body begins rousing even before the last of the sun's rays are creeping down below the horizon. It's not enough to free me from my daily turmoil. The nightmare holds fast.

As I sleep, and I try to kick free of the slumber of the dead, I hear her. She is always in the background. The sound of her laughing, of her screaming, of her sighing with pleasure. I would always listen to those sounds to know if it was safe.

The only time I could ever be certain, was when she was writhing beneath me. When Domitia trembled at my hand, I knew a second of safety. When I tamed her with my tongue, there would be a pause from peril, a period of protection.

But I always knew the higher she rose on the peak, the sooner she would come crashing down and bring a world of agony down on me.

And so, trapped in the last few moments of my slumber, I rub. I lick. I pump into her with everything I have to keep her on that edge for as long as possible.

Stamina meant a reprieve from the sting. Endurance meant a break from her bite. Virility meant a deferment from discomfort.

Pleasure is not for me. I have to keep my wits, else I lose control of myself and she takes the reins of power. And then there would be real torture.

I know there will be pain eventually. Domitia cannot be happy unless she hurts the ones she cares about. She is a true sadist.

The sounds of her pleasure reach a crescendo. I know that my time is nearly up. The pain is coming.

What will it be this time? Will she pierce my scrotum again, adding a new adornment to my balls? Perhaps a new brand on my flesh? Hopefully this time, she'll use a hot iron and not tear at my skin with her fingernails. Whatever way Domitia decides she'll show her twisted love for me today, I take a deep breath and prepare, knowing there is no escape from her.

She smiles her cruel grin that displays her otherworldly beauty. That grin led a child of the slums to follow behind an older woman and become ensnared in her fangs. She brought me from down low, up to a high place. I never suspected she would thrill in dropping me from on high, over and over again.

Her smile stretches across her face. Her eyes flash. She bares her fangs. I brace for the pain, only to scramble awake.

My mouth is open wide on a soundless scream. My fingers are wrapped around torn sheets. My eyes see the last strands of sunlight setting from the corner of the room.

In the shadows of my bedroom sits a large figure, huddled in the darkness. My fear does not increase. My anxiety lessens at the sight of him.

"Dreaming of her again?" Virius asks.

I still haven't found my voice, so I do not respond. He doesn't need me to. The three of us have this in common. We all dream of her. Hadrian's dreams are ones of longing and shame. Mine are filled with performance anxiety and pain. Virius? I dare not think of what horrors she put him through. Of the three of us, I know he got it the worst.

Domitia made Hadrian love her. She made me fuck her into senseless pleasure. Virius? Him, she liked to share.

"I still can't believe she is truly gone," says Virius. His chest is bare. He wears only a loincloth wrapped around his hips in the way of his warrior ancestors.

"She is." I find my voice to give my brother the assurance. "I saw her burn this time. There were no tricks."

Lucius had taken Domitia into his dungeons. There, he had exacted revenge for all of them, including the countless young men Domitia had turned over the centuries only to slaughter at whim. Hadrian hadn't been interested in seeing his former love again, now that he had the true love of his life. It had taken days to coax Virius out of the cellars after her return. I had gone to watch Domitia turn to ash for my brothers. She smiled at me one last time as she burned. Her eyes had fluttered as though she liked the pain of death. She probably had.

"Do you think that she will haunt us?" said Virius.

"She could if she had a soul, which she does not. So, we're safe."

Virius appears to turn that word over in his mind. *Safe*. None of us know the definition any longer—if we ever have.

I say nothing of seeing Domitia nightly in my dreams. The only thing that would free me of that apparition would be to stay awake all day. But my skin allergy and need for blood preclude me from accomplishing that feat.

I should get up. But I feel restless. My sleep hasn't been fitful in years.

In times like these, I would reach out for a woman. A submissive female whose pleasure I could control, whose climax I could toy with, whose will I could bend to my fancy. Being in control of a woman's pleasure is the only way I feel safe, both in the sleeping and waking worlds. As long as a pussy is writhing at my command, all is well.

I look over at my brother. Virius is watching me. His dark eyes are clear, the bags heavy under them.

"When's the last time you slept?" I ask.

Virus shrugs his large shoulders. Though we are both compelled by the sun to sleep, that does not mean we ever rest. Viri's eyes are always wide. I can't remember the last time I've seen the man blink. His fists and biceps are always gathered in bulges, as though he's perpetually ready to strike.

"Come." I pat my mattress, scooting over to make room for him.

Virius rises and comes to the bed. The mattress dips as the cushions welcome his big body. He lies down on his back and stares at the ceiling. The tension remains in every cord of his being.

"Rest a while." I place my hand on his shoulder. "I'll watch your back."

Bit by bit, the tension seeps out of his body. The sun has set by the time Virius is softly snoring. I stay awake and watch my brother. It reminds me of the old days when Domitia took in a new pet. During those few weeks, while her attention was diverted, Viri and I stole our rest. We would listen to the moans and screams of her newest toy, knowing that she would soon tire of them and come looking again for her favorites.

Back then, Virius and I would take shifts, sleeping back to back, watching for the dangers of our mistress. Still to

this day, I sleep best when I know he is near. Tonight it is my turn to keep watch for as long as he needs.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*M*arechal

WHEN I PEER down into the microscope, I worry that the time may have come when I need glasses. The image in the lens is in focus. The specimen is clear to see. And that is the problem.

I pull away to peer down at the Serrano vine without the 400x magnification. The root rot is clear and present on the ends of the vine. But under the lens, I saw... nothing.

That can not be.

I increase the magnification and look again. I get the same result. There are no wormlike growths attached to the plant's cells. No oblong organisms. The plant looks healthy inside. But on the outside, it is dying.

Is this some kind of joke? If it is, it's an elaborate one. Gaius didn't hand me this vine. I plucked it from the vineyard myself after he... plucked me.

The ringing of my cell phone buries the thought before it can take root in my mind. Looking down at the caller ID is enough to make me drop the plant and jerk away from my tools.

"Cari! "

"Hey, Mare, it's me."

"I know it's you. Where are you?"

"I'm with Hadrian."

Her voice sounds different, raspy, as though she's thirsty. My first thought is what it always is with my younger siblings. "Is he feeding you?"

Cari chokes on the other end of the line. My maternal instincts go into overdrive. I want to hang up and dial 911, but I have no idea where she is, or where the nearest emergency room is. Hadrian better know CPR, or I'll kill him.

My baby sister, whom I've cared for since the day she was born, is gasping for air. But it's not because she's choking. "Are you laughing?"

Cari clears her throat, but another snort escapes her mouth.

"I don't see what's so funny," I say through gritted teeth.

"Just a private joke between me and Hadrian."

"Your kidnapper."

"We're married, Mare."

"You just met him two weeks ago. It's all happened so fast. Tell me, Cari, did he force you to do this?"

"Really?" There's another snort on the other end. "You raised me, Marechal. Do you really think I'd let a man make me do anything?"

Despite myself, I chuckle. We're giggling now, and it feels good. It would feel better if she was standing next to me. I'd reach over and give her a one-armed hug. I'm a couple of inches taller than my sister, so my chin would rest atop her head. I'd turn my face until my nose was in her hair and I'd inhale, catching a whiff of the sweet scent she's carried with her since she was a baby.

"I'm fine, Mare. This is what I want. You've had to take care of me all my life. It wasn't fair to you. Especially this past year when I've been so awful."

“Papa’s passing was hard on all of us.”

“Yeah,” she agrees. “On all of us. And you took care of me and Arnie. But who’s there to take care of you?”

I cross my free arm over my midsection, preparing to tell my baby sister I don’t need anyone to take care of me. That I can handle it myself. That I’m just fine.

As soon as the thought flits across my frontal cortex, a familiar weight settles down over my shoulders like a shawl of stones. The heaviness spreads through my body until my feet feel itchy, as though an irritating fungus is growing there. Goose pimples rise on my arms, like the pockmarks on the vine under my scope.

But unlike the vine which looks bad on the outside and healthy on the inside, I am fine. Both inside and out.

“You were with Gaius the other day.”

The sound of his name makes the stone shawl slip from my shoulders. The bumps on my arms settle.

“He’s a good man,” she continues.

My gaze narrows, though I know she can’t see me. In the past, Cari has tried to set me up with her middle school gym teacher, her high school AP Chemistry teacher, and her ethics professor from her freshman year of college.

“He could be good for you.”

“We’re not talking about me, Carignan. We’re talking about you.”

“I’m so happy, Mare. I want you to be as happy as me.”

I don’t have time for a relationship. There is always so much on my plate. Since I was a teen, I’ve been running a business, raising children, and taking care of a household. The few times I dated, those men only served to add to my to-do list—including carving out the time at night to do them.

But last night, Gaius Serrano had taken just a few minutes to do me. Even though I hadn’t gotten the muscle clenching written about in a Penthouse fiction story, I had experienced a release. It had been nice. Really nice.

To be taken care of by someone else.

To take off all that weight on my shoulders.

To simply lie back and experience pleasure.

But it had come at a price. One I am not willing to pay again. My integrity is worth more than a few moments of bliss. Isn't it?

"I'll be home soon, Mare. I just need some time to... adjust to my new life with Hadrian. If you need anything, just ask Gaius."

"Cari—"

"Mare, I've gotta go. I'll see you soon. I promise."

The line goes dead. I have half a mind to redial, but I know she won't answer. Cari is right in one regard: I raised her well. No one can make her do something that she doesn't want.

I have to admit that Hadrian didn't kidnap her. I never truly believed it. I just don't like not knowing where she is, or having access to her. That might make me a helicopter sister, but I'll take the title if it keeps my siblings safe.

I straighten my spine as I hang up the phone. The heavy shawl settles back around my shoulders. At least the imaginary weight is enough to hold off the goosebumps on my arms this time.

"There you are."

The sound of his voice loosens the burden wrapped around me. As I turn to face him, the weight falls entirely away. His smoldering gaze is on my heels, making a slow circuitous route up the line of my skirt, over the curve of my breasts, and finally, to my face. Goosebumps have risen on every inch of flesh that Gaius's eyes touched.

He is dressed in an impeccably tailored suit. The fabric shows off his powerful thighs. His long limbs end in expensive, polished shoes. The button is open on his coat. The silk of his shirt clings to his pecs. The muscles under that shirt look enticing, bitable.

Bitable? I give myself a shake. I have never once thought of biting a man. I have never had sexual thoughts about a man. But just the sight of Gaius Serrano standing in my doorway, backlit by the moonlight, makes my libido flare to life like never before.

"See something interesting?" he drawls.

"What? No. Don't flatter yourself, Mr. Serrano. How did you even get in here?"

"You invited me last week."

Last week? When I'd met him and Hadrian for the first time? Why is he referring to that? "I mean tonight. What are you doing here now?"

He motions to the vine under the scope.

"There's nothing there," I say.

"Are you saying there's nothing wrong with my vines?"

"The rot is there. It's clear as the eye can see. But the scopes don't pick up any organisms inside the plant. I've never seen anything like it."

Gaius bends down and peers into the scope. I peer at him as he does so. I'm not sure if it's simply seeing the tight curve of his backside, or if it's watching him handle my tools, but I do see something interesting.

"Hmmm," he says as he straightens.

"Hmmm? There's an unseen pathogen attacking your vineyard and that's all you have to say about it?"

Gaius inhales deeply. His chest rises with the motion. His chest muscles press more firmly against the fabric of his shirt. So much so that I can see the outline of his nipples. My mouth waters, and I ache to run my tongue over them.

I swallow hard, trying to banish that thought from my entire being. This man is my enemy. He holds the fate of my business in his hand. And he's cavalier in his handling of it.

"Perhaps your equipment needs cleaning," he says.

"Excuse me?" Did this man really just call into question the performance of my tools? "There is nothing wrong with

my equipment. This is a state of the art lab, and I am meticulous in the upkeep of all my tools."

"I'm sure you are, Ms. Durand. My apologies."

Again, his gaze rakes over me, taking in every detail again even though he already looked me over when he came into the room. I feel like I am now under the microscope of Gaius's lens. I'm certain he can see into the heart of me. That he can tell that I've been fantasizing about him.

"Let me make it up to you. Let me have you for dinner."

He says *have you*, not *take you*. My survival instinct warns me that wasn't a slip of the tongue.

"Is this going to turn into another sex deal?"

"Would you like it to turn into another sex deal?"

Gaius flashes white teeth when he grins. My fight or flight response goes haywire. The survival instinct is telling me to run. But the direction it points towards for safety is into Gaius's arms.

"This is sexual harassment," I say.

"Not if I have your consent."

"You're lording your power over me to get me to do what you want."

"You're right. I am lording my power over you. Because it's what you want."

He steps closer to me. So close, I can smell the salt of the sweat behind his ear. His hot breath has notes of sweet wine. Something dark. Perhaps a Japanese plum wine? A Sémillion grape, maybe?

It makes me think of the blend I've been working on all month: a dessert wine with notes of blackcurrant and raspberries. I'm certain it'll be a hit with the younger college crowd who are just learning to refine their palettes. But will I even be allowed to make it with a purist like Gaius Serrano at the helm of my company?

"The only thing I want from you is my company. But I'm not going to whore myself out to you to get it."

The lazy smile drops from his face. His upper lip crashes into his lower lip like an expensive bottle of wine falling to the floor. "Never use that word in the same sentence as yourself."

"But that's what this is; sexual favors for currency."

"No," he says, his smug smile restored. "The shares are a gift, like a piece of jewelry between lovers."

"We're not lovers."

"No," he says, his smile holding a hint of sadness. "I don't have lovers. Lovers have sex. Intercourse. They fuck."

I don't flinch at his rude words. But between my legs, I am aching and wet. Gaius's nostrils flare as though he can scent that private truth.

"I don't want to fuck you, Marechal. I just want to play with your cunny."

I flinch then. A whoosh of air leaves my mouth just as my nostrils flare to take more in. The result leaves me lightheaded.

"I want to make your pussy throb with want and then weep with pleasure. I want the pleasure from my hands, from my tongue, to rise so high inside of you that you beg me to fuck you."

The silence looms between us. All I can hear is the sound of his even breaths. My own inhales are shallow, but I am able to find my voice. "I'll die before I ask you for anything."

It's the wrong thing to say. I imagine Eve likely said the same thing to the snake before he coaxed her into her own downfall.

"Let's make a deal, Ms. Durand. If I can't make you come ten times tonight, I'll give you back three more shares."

I open my mouth to tell him to go to hell. Only one word comes out. "Six."

Six shares would give me back the controlling interest in my company. I would be back in charge.

"Four," he counters.

"Six," I hold steady.

“Five, and that’s my final offer. For tonight.”

His voice is like a hiss in my ear. His grin is too wide. I can see all of his white teeth flashing, like a snake ready to pounce.

I should back away. I should run. If I get in bed with this man, I could lose more than the keys to paradise. I could very well lose my soul.

“Deal.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gaius

CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, not all vampires fly. But we do all move faster than human perception. Perhaps that's why I like fast cars.

My Venom zips through the city, handling the hairpin turns with ease at eighty miles per hour. Beside me, Marechal is strapped into the passenger seat. I expect her to admonish me for my speed. As the speedometer clicks past eighty-five, she doesn't open her mouth.

Instead, her thighs are pressed together. Her nails are digging into the leather of the seat. Her chest rises and falls in quick pants. I can see her nipples pebbling beneath her shirt.

Just as I suspected. The tightly wound woman likes being out of her own control and in mine. She might not be a submissive in the sense that she wants a Master to dominate her, but she will hand over her power to me. I just need to show her that I am more than man enough to handle her, just as easily and deftly as I handle this car.

Up ahead, there is a bend in the road. Marechal lets out a slow exhale as I take the curve. Her fingers relax in her lap, as though the worries of the day are slipping loose of her hold. Her back arches as the speed climbs to one hundred. Her sigh harmonizes to the hum of the engine as I zip in and out of the slow-moving domestic cars.

She voices not a single concern. Not a peep of protest. She is the picture of submission as she lets me dominate from my place in the driver's seat.

I would have driven forever. Instead, I drive past the turn that would take us back to the Serrano vineyard and head to town. Marechal's eyes are closed but she is wide awake, fully aware of everything happening to her. From the circulating air in the car, I can smell that she is aroused.

I want to keep her on the edge of this pleasure. I want to make it last for her. And then I will play with her all night until she screams herself hoarse from the pleasure I will bring.

It's been a long time that I was this giddy to play. I have half a mind to turn the car around and head home. The Venom could handle the sharp change in direction. But I want to walk on the edge alongside Marechal.

I ease the car to a stop in a downtown parking lot. This part of town is teeming with youths at this time of night. Marechal opens her eyes and frowns in confusion as she takes in the sight. The fact that she doesn't question me pleases me immensely.

She takes my hand as I open the passenger door. We walk past the line of people waiting to get into the restaurant and are seated immediately in my favorite spot, the best spot in the place. I wave the menus away and order for her. I order a selection of appetizers, an entree, and a dessert. But only enough for one.

As a vampire, I can eat human foods. I can even enjoy them. The only appetite I have this evening is for the woman sitting across from me.

Again, she doesn't argue as I order for her. She sits back and watches my every move, as though she's searching for a weakness and preparing to strike. The only time she sits forward and voices a protest is at my wine selection.

"We'll have the 1990 Château Margaux," I say.

"That only comes by the bottle, sir."

It's a \$1200 bottle. I lift my gaze to glare at the server. The waiter takes in my tailored Versace suit and Rolex. He gulps and nods, straightening to go.

"Wait," says Marechal, raising a finger. "I don't care for the Margaux. I'd prefer the 1989 Château Cheval Blanc. And you can put it on my tab."

It's a \$1300 bottle. The waiter looks between the two of us. He wisely steps back from the pissing contest going on.

"What's your issue with the Margaux?" I ask.

"The vineyard is on the left bank of Bordeaux. I find the grapes on the right bank, such as the Cheval, are richer."

I can only grin. The woman surprises me at every turn. For someone as old as I am, that is a novelty.

"I thought we were headed to your place?" she says.

"I need to feed you first. You'll need your strength for the work I have planned for you."

Her smile is tight. "Aren't you a gracious boss?"

"I expect you to buy me a mug that proclaims it."

Her snorting laugh is a surprise to us both. It's the most unladylike sound. I wanted to make this buttoned-up, no-nonsense woman do it again.

"Anyway, I wouldn't expect any Employer of the Year awards too soon," she says. "You won't be my boss for much longer."

"That is assuming I don't win our latest bet."

"I don't think you want to win. I think you just want to prove me wrong."

Once again, she tries to peer inside me. I want to tell her that it is a futile exercise. There are no depths to me. I like

to eat food. I like to eat pussy. And I like to look good doing it.

“What happens when I get the controlling shares of my company back?”

“Then I won’t have anything you want any longer. And you won’t have any need to play my little games anymore.”

She swallows hard. I can see the knot lodge in her throat. I thrill at the knowledge that she might not want this to end. Which is strange. I never want more from a woman. Hell, I can’t remember the last time I sat down for a meal with a woman. Or had a conversation with one.

Marechal fidgets in her chair. I know she’s uncomfortable with the deal we’ve made. I should’ve taken her straight to her bed and begun. Hell, I should’ve laid her out on her lab table and buried my nose in what I know will be a tight cunt. But I love watching her squirm. It’ll make her juices all the more sweet; richer than the Cheval wine she now sips at.

“You’ve never been here?” I ask.

She shakes her head as she toys with her stem.

“You don’t flaunt your wealth?”

“Money doesn’t interest me. Science does. Advancing my business. Taking care of my family. Handling my responsibilities.”

“And shoes.”

We both glance down at her crossed legs. They end in designer shoes. Vintage French. I think I might’ve flogged the designer a few decades ago.

“Are we not going to talk about your sick vines?” she says after the food arrives. “This might be a new disease. One that doesn’t penetrate the inner workings of the plant. We need to collect more samples. We could even publish a paper on our findings.”

Our findings? Fates, if the woman isn’t sexy as sin when she talks science. I hate to disappoint her, but alerting the

human population to what's happening in my vineyard is the last thing I'm about to do.

I don't need any human attention on my property. Especially not after what I saw in Marechal's microscope. She couldn't see it with her human vision, but I saw the signs clearly. My family and I might be well and truly fucked. But I'll deal with that later.

"You know, there's a rumor that your land is cursed," she says.

I try not to chew the inside of my lip. It's a habit that shows my annoyance. Instead, I cock my head to the side and regard her. "The scientist believes in curses?"

She doesn't take the bait. But I know her intellectual mind isn't latched onto the idea either. She's just doing what she does best; problem solve.

"When I was a kid, there were stories that if you snuck onto Old Man Palmezzo's vineyard, the vines would eat you up and suck you down into the ground like a Venus Flytrap."

I say nothing to confirm or deny the childhood tales. There are caverns beneath the vineyard in some parts. My brothers and I went down there when we first came here.

"Today, one of my harvest workers told a different story. She said her people used to own the land."

"Her people?"

"She's Native American. Or indigenous? I'm not sure. She said it was her people who angered the god of the underworld, and that he's the one who won't allow anything to grow there until he is appeased by... what did she call it?"

I hold tight to my amused smile, but the prickles are crawling up my back. It must be something really bad to make a vampire's skin crawl.

"Oh, I remember. She said nothing would grow until the night sun greets the dawn. Maybe she means an eclipse?"

"That's some tale."

I keep my features placid. There are all kinds of lores in my world. I don't usually hold truck with curses and myths. But I respect them enough to know that there's often a grain of truth to them. I'll discuss this with my brothers later. Right now, I want to focus on the dessert I've brought to dinner.

"You're not going to eat?" Marechal asks.

"I think I will have an appetizer."

I reach forward and take her left hand. I raise her knuckles to my mouth as though I'm going to kiss them. Instead, I take her index and then middle finger into my mouth.

The fork in Marechal's right hand clanks to her plate. The restaurant is too full of the hum of dinner conversation for anyone to notice her flub. She doesn't yank her hand from me. She watches with wide eyes and an open mouth.

After I suckle her fingers, I give them back to her. "Put them in your cunt."

She blinks as if she's coming out of a pleasant dream. I can see the moment realization strikes and she comprehends my words. I give her no space to disobey me.

"Now."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*M*arechal

MY FINGERS TREMBLE as they leave Gaius's lips. His tongue is pure velvet, a hot sheath that I now ache to taste. But his mouth closes. His lips press together in a firm line.

"Do it," he commands.

My hand flutters as it glides away from him and back across the table to me. It's my hand. The nails I trimmed and painted a pale coral a few days ago. On my index finger is the scar from an accident with pruning shears when I was a teen.

My hand is capable. My hand is sure. But my hand is no longer my own. It follows this man's command and slips under the table.

The din of the restaurant becomes amplified in my ears. A woman at the table to my right lets out a tittering laugh. To the left, a man is standing, his wine glass lifted to start a toast. The hostess seats a new couple. A waiter's head bobs as he takes down an order. Dishes clatter into a busboy's bin.

Meanwhile, my hand has rucked up my skirt. As my fingers inch up my inner thigh, they leave a trail of Gaius's wetness on my flesh. My mind runs away from me, imagining it's his tongue.

I gasp at the thought.

Gaius grins from across the table.

I'd often wondered why Eve listened to the snake. Later, I learned what a metaphor was. The devil was said to be the most beautiful angel. Easy to see why they changed his character to a spineless creature that slithered on the ground.

"Move your panties aside, *minou*."

There's that pronunciation again. Part of me wants to correct his French. The other part simply wants to listen to his silky baritone make another command.

My fingers do what Gaius tells them to. I shift my bottom on the hard wood of the chair. For a moment, I worry that I sat in a spill. The area beneath me is damp where it wasn't a moment ago. I shudder to realize all that moisture came from me.

"Run your fingers along the seam."

My fingers do as they're told. My index finger starts at the top of my slit. As it moves southward, I feel as though I'm unzipping myself. A cheer goes up to the left of us. The table all raise their glasses as the toast is done.

"Eyes on me."

I jerk my attention back to Gaius. His eyes gleam as they bore into mine. His unwavering gaze makes me feel as though he not only sees exactly what I'm doing under the table, but what it's doing to me inside.

I am coming untethered. Unbound. Unconcerned. Touching myself in such an intimate way in a public space is exciting. But not as exciting as the weightlessness of being under Gaius's command.

"Press your index finger inside that tight, hot sheath, *minou*."

There is resistance when I do so. My sheath hasn't been breached in years. Not by a man, not by me. I have long lost my patience for the fumbling of men down there. I've never had the desire to masturbate. I see now I'll need to rethink both those thoughts.

"Deeper."

I gasp as I comply. My finger presses further. I'm in up to my knuckle.

"Swirl it around, get all the good juices for me."

I do as I'm told. More wetness coats my finger and trickles down into my palm. The sound reminds me of the squishy noise that comes from stomping grapes. My inner walls have the same wet, velvety feel.

"How are you finding everything tonight?"

My back goes rigid as I look over to see the waiter. His gaze is on Gaius and not me. On another night, I would berate the man for his misogynist microaggression. Luckily for him, I have my hands full of other matters.

"Box this up, will you?" says Gaius. "I'm going to finish my meal at home."

The waiter nods and begins removing the plates. Gaius has not taken his gaze off me. I can tell he's waiting to see if I remove my hand. I do not. Even if the waiter wasn't clearing our table, my fingers are sticky with my intimate wetness. And he just took the dinner napkin away.

"Now, give them to me."

My mouth falls open. Of all the things this man has told me to do tonight, this is what shocks me? Slowly, almost reluctantly, I pull my finger from myself. I have to hold myself still on the seat as it's soaked with an even bigger puddle now. I need to get that dinner napkin back to cover the mess I've made, or I can never show my face here again.

When my hand reappears above the table, it glistens in the dim lighting of the restaurant. It feels as though all conversation has stopped and every eye is on my fingers

and the shame that coats it. Though what I'm feeling couldn't be called shame. It's too warm, too tingly.

I look to Gaius, waiting for his next command.

He is silent. But the gleam in his eyes shines even brighter. His grin stretches wider. Is that pride?

He leans forward. His lips part. He gazes at me, expectantly. I swallow hard when I realize what he wants me to do.

Once again, my hand trembles as it makes its way to him. I place my index finger on his lip. Gaius's tongue snakes out of his mouth. It captures my finger and sucks it inside. He licks the top, the bottom, and the sides of my finger. The tip of his tongue hardens as it flicks under my fingernail. He hums a low hum of satisfaction that reverberates through my hand. It travels down my body and zings my core, causing little flutters of the muscles.

Was that an orgasm? I'm not sure. A wave of bliss washes over me, and I feel ready to curl into a fetal position and nap.

I can't believe I just did that.

I can't believe I just fingered myself in a dining room and let a man suck the evidence off my fingers. Who the hell am I? And whoever she is, do I want to keep being her?

Gaius's hand is clasped around mine as we leave the restaurant. He's rubbing his thumb over the finger I used to touch myself. He said he would make me orgasm ten times. I don't bother to tell him that he only has nine more times for this night. But I think he knows.

I teeter in my heels on the pavement outside. I've navigated fresh earth in heels. But walking next to this man has turned my legs into a wilting vine.

Am I really doing this? Am I really going to let him fuck me to get the shares back?

If I'm honest, it's not entirely about the shares. I want that pleasure. Not just the pleasure, I want the release. I

want that feeling of weightlessness that seems to come whenever he is over me, near me, telling me what to do.

Will he really give me ten orgasms? Is it even physically possible? I know I'm not going to complain while he tries.

He rubs his thumb over the center of my palm. I feel the sensation in my aching core. He could probably finger me with his thumb on my palm and get me off.

This is madness. I've gone insane. And I'm fucking giddy over it.

"Did you just giggle?" Gaius asks.

"I... I think I did."

He looks down at me. My face is upturned to his. I'm a tall woman. One who insists on heels, to boot. His height doesn't make me feel small. It makes him appear capable of handling me.

I'd thought this man frivolous, self-centered, and reckless. He might be all of those things. But when his attention is focused on me, I feel like the center of someone else's world. It's a feeling I'm growing addicted to.

From the corner of my eye, I spy movement. There is something in the shadows. That something has arms and legs, and they're coming at us.

I don't think. I react. I have just enough time to shove Gaius away. But he doesn't budge. Instead, his body blocks mine and I hear a yelp of pain.

I reach for Gaius, already preparing to search for any wound. It's not Gaius who needs my care. Gaius has the body from the shadows pinned against the wall with one hand. In the light of the alley, I see it's a kid. A scrawny kid.

Gaius doesn't appear to care. Those eyes that were gleaming at me a moment ago are filled with rage. His hand is a five-fingered noose around the kid's neck.

"Gaius, it's just a child."

"Men do not attack women," he growls. His voice does not sound human.

"I wasn't going for her," the kid manages to wheeze. "I was going for the bag."

On the ground is the doggie bag of food the waiter had packed for us, along with the two bottles of expensive wine. Only shards remain of the pricey drinks.

"I was grabbing for the food. I wasn't going to hurt anybody. I'm just hungry."

Something flickers in Gaius's eyes. The rage melts away but what it reveals isn't exactly clear. Tendon by tendon, he releases the kid. Before the youth can scurry away with the bruises on his neck, Gaius grabs him by the shirt.

Gaius takes the bag with one hand, still holding onto the kid with the other. He reaches into his pocket and drops a few bills into the bag and then hands it to the youth. The kid's eyes grow wide. The moment Gaius lets him go, he takes off running with his prize.

Gaius stands with his hands in his pocket, watching the kid's retreating form. His gaze is wistful, as though a memory is playing behind his eyes. What memory, I can't imagine. The Serranos come from old money.

"Are you okay?" He turns to me, looking me up and down. His large hands run over my arms and shoulders, checking me much like I would do to them when Cari or Arnie came out of a scrape.

"I'm fine," I say.

His gentle probe turns forceful as he grips my shoulders firmly. "What were you thinking, moving in front of me? Did you think I couldn't protect you?"

My brain is rattled, and it takes me a moment to parse his words from his actions. "I don't know? I wasn't thinking clearly. It was probably my maternal instinct. I've been raising my younger siblings since I was a kid myself. I don't know any other way to react."

Gaius stares at me for a long moment—so long that I begin to squirm under his perusal.

“That was kind of you, to give that kid the food and the money.”

He doesn't answer, just rubs a thumb over my lip. “I need to make you come. Now.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Gaius

“EYES ON ME.”

Marechal’s gaze rises from what my fingers are doing to rest on my face. The honey wine color of her eyes makes me feel drunk. I continue unbuttoning her shirt by feel only, unable to look away.

Could she be a witch? Is that why she’s making me feel desperate for her? I’m old enough to know that real magic exists in this world. Part of me aches to tell this sexy scientist of the unexplainable things hidden in plain sight so that I might watch her bite her plump lips to parse out an explanation.

I don’t bother with any tales of the fantastical. I’m at the end of my rope with the need for her. I’m also at the end of her buttons. I tug her shirttails from her skirt.

Her nipples poke through the lace of her white bra. The buds are dark, like plum wine. I know I’m in trouble if my mouth is watering for such a cheap dessert wine. My dick is throbbing, and now my fangs ache. Marechal doesn’t know

it, but I'm going to feast on her in more than one way tonight.

I wonder: if she knew of my blood-sucking tendencies, would she insist on putting me under her microscope? Would I become her lab specimen that she would poke and prod? Hell, the thought almost seems appealing if I get to have her attention on me.

Marechal raises her hands to unbutton my shirt. Before she can land on a single button, I catch both her wrists in my grasp. It's an old habit. Though there's an ache in my chest where I want to feel her palms pressed against my flesh, I do not risk it. I cannot. Not if I want to derive any pleasure for myself from tonight. And I do. I plan to get punch drunk off this woman's pleasure.

I reach for the silky belt of one of my robes. Turning her wrists face up, I began to bind Marechal's hands. She looks down at my actions, her dark gaze lighting with need even as she questions me.

"What are you doing?" Her voice is breathy, a quiet hum of excitement.

"What I promised you. Ten orgasms. I have a lot of work to do. I don't want you getting in my way."

With her hands secure, I pull Marechal to me. She tilts her head back as she looks up at me. There is no fear in her eyes, only desire.

It's been a long time since I've been drunk. My supernaturally fast metabolism doesn't allow for it. But looking into her Sémillion grape eyes, I feel intoxicated. It's the only reason I can fathom for what I do next. Because I do something I haven't done in centuries; I take a woman's mouth with my own.

I have tasted the finest wines across the world. Nothing compares to Marechal's lips. She is honey and silk. She is robust and decadent.

Her bound hands are trapped between our chests. Her fingers land softly on my chest. The impact of her small

finger pads on my flesh nearly knocks me down.

It's been so long since I've felt a woman's touch. So long since I've craved it. I was still human at the time of my last craving for contact. In the next moment, I came to understand that love was pain, and desire could hurt.

Marechal's nails scraping against my chest should rattle me. Instead, they ground me in the present moment. I hold still, waiting for a vision of Domitia's pale face to intrude. But all I see is golden brown skin. All I feel in the scratch of Marechal's nails is a desire to find purchase.

I need her to know that I won't let her fall. I want her to know that I will only lift her up. So I do. Placing my hands on her hips, my tongue still tangling with hers, I raise Marechal bodily from the ground and toss her back on the bed.

Her long limbs sail through the air. Only to land on the bed with a thud. She is splayed unladylike on the mattress. It had to be done. It was the only way that kiss would end, and I have work to do.

I tug down the zipper of her skirt and shimmy her long legs out of the garment. She is left in her lace bra, soaked panties, and those pointed heels. A decadent dessert that I will gorge myself on.

The bed dips as I place one knee on the mattress. Marechal's breath catches as she watches me prowl up her body. Using her heel, she digs into the mattress and scoots back, away from me. Without her hands, she can't find purchase to move much further, nor much faster. She is bound, at my mercy, and I am on her.

I catch one leg. Holding her heel in the palm of my hands, I slide my fingers up her ankle. She shudders at my touch.

"Be a good girl," I say. "Spread your legs for me."

With a shaky breath, she lets her knees fall open. I could've gotten off right there just from this strong woman following the simplest of commands. I need her begging. I

need her panting my name. I need to make her back arch and her pussy quiver until she passes out from pleasure.

Gazing down at her, I take a slow inventory of her body, determining where to strike first. Where to put the pressure to tear her apart, knowing that when she comes back together, she will be stronger. And then I'll do it all again.

I hook my thumbs on either side of her panties. With a tug, the material snaps in two, rendering her bare for my gaze. Her pussy lips are not the rosé I'd imagined. Her intimate flesh is the coppery-red of a Catawba grape, an American variety used not only for wine but also for jams and jellies. The color, on Marechal, makes sense.

She gasps when my fingers find her swollen bud. It took me a second longer than normal because her entire cunt is swollen. I give her light touches because I know she craves a strong hand. I've already proven that I am that hand, that I am more than capable of managing her.

It still galls me that she attempted to protect me from that street vagrant. But it also confuses me. As well as it thrills me. I don't know what to make of it, except that I need to make her shiver with the deep, gratifying pleasure that only I can give her.

Marechal moves in time to my strokes. I keep my finger at the right pressure for my touch to be feather-light. She tries to move her hips closer to me, trying to manage me into what she wants. But I know what she needs.

I use my knees to spread her wider, stopping the rise of her hips. When she begins to whimper, satisfaction pours through me. There is nothing like watching a woman break for me. The trembling starts all too soon.

I keep my touch light and soon, trapped as she is, she is bucking against my hand. The wet sounds of my fingers slipping across her little bud make my mouth water. Her cunt and her mouth are gasping with need. The fat pad of my thumb is drenched as she continues to shake with

pleasure. I pet her until she comes down. When she opens her eyes, I confirm the count on the scoreboard for our little game.

“That was number two.”

Her eyes widen with realization. Of course, I know she came in the restaurant. I hook her bound hands onto a notch on the headboard. Then I lie down on my belly between her thighs, ready for the game to begin in earnest.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

*M*arechal

I WISH I knew how to lie. I want to tell Gaius that I didn't come back in the restaurant. That way, I'd have nine more of these delightful little explosions to look forward to.

I am a greedy woman.

But I can barely talk as I watch his head bob up and down between my thighs. I've barely stopped trembling from the last orgasm as his tongue laps up the wetness it brought forth. He licks the creases between my thighs, where the elastic of my panties had dug in. He tugs my labia between his lips, as though my flesh were nothing more than a spoon he's licking a dessert from. The more he licks, the wetter I get. The wetter I get, the more he laps it up. Because that is the sound this tongue makes as he suckles at me. The man between my thighs is a big cat, a panther who is lapping up a treat.

The feel of his lips, his tongue, and even his teeth is too much. I need a reprieve. But I can't close my legs. His big shoulders keep me open for his pleasure. His large hands press me open wider.

He takes long, leisurely licks. His eyes remain open, never closing, as though he can't get enough of what he's seeing.

I have to fight to keep my gaze on him. Each time my eyes flutter, I force them back open, not wanting to miss a single second of this.

When he wraps his lips around the oversensitive flesh at the apex of my sex, I am lost. My eyes shut. My mouth opens. And I scream my pleasure.

I slam my thighs closed as another orgasm explodes. But my thighs meet with Gaius's head. My heels dig into his back. He flexes his shoulders, letting the spikes of my stilettos dig into his flesh.

Slowly, he lifts his head, licking his upper lip as his eyes gleam at me. "Three."

Fuck. I collapse back on the pillow. Greedy as I am, I don't know how I'll take seven more of these. But I want them. I want every single one as my due.

Gaius rises off the bed. Is he stopping? Is he giving up? Maybe I should start cheerleading instead of naysaying because I'm now a believer. With those clever fingers and that wicked tongue, I think he can have me trembling in pleasure for the rest of the night.

But wait? Is that what I want? How exactly did our newest bet go? Do I win if I come ten times? Or do I lose? It doesn't matter. I want more.

I whimper in protest as he comes to standing. I reach out to him, only to remember that my arms are bound. I hadn't even realized he'd done it. I could raise my forearms and lift the knotted tie from the headboard if I wanted. Or I could simply tug until the knot came loose.

I do neither. There's something about the feeling of being bound that makes me feel free.

On the other side of the room, Gaius rummages around in a drawer. I can't see what he has in his hands as he

turns. On his way back to me, he stops at an easel and picks up a brush.

When he splays his wares on the mattress, I gasp. My thighs press together, not closing entirely due to the swollen lips he's just kissed. My gaze catches his. The wicked sparkle in his eyes is clear in the low light of the room.

Gaius runs his fingers over a paintbrush; a long dildo that's curved like a U-pipe at the tip; a second toy with a bulbous head that I know is a Magic Wand; and rope.

"What are you going to do with those?" My voice is small, barely above a whisper, and filled with tremors.

"What I promised."

I open my mouth to protest. Nothing comes out. Because I don't have a single objection to his plan. Hell, I don't even question him about his strategy—because I want whatever he's going to do to me.

Gaius reaches for my hands and unties the belt. Disappointment rushes down my arms along with the blood as I regain my mobility. Now that I'm no longer restrained, questions about his intentions flood my brain.

Is he going to put those dildos inside of me? What's the purpose of the one that's curved? The Magic Wand definitely won't fit inside me, and I'd prefer his tongue again. And what's with the paintbrush?

I don't ask a single question because when I look up, he's smiling at me. As though he's anticipating every one of my queries.

"You are a very naughty girl, aren't you, Marechal?"

I shake my head, no. I'm a good girl. I always do what is expected of me. I do not shirk from my responsibilities. I can feel them coming back down on my shoulders now that I'm free of the belt.

"You like being bound."

It's not a question, so I don't answer. I'm sure he knows how I feel. At every turn, he seems to know exactly what I

need.

Gaius takes the rope in one hand and one of my thighs in the other. He begins to loop the rope around my knee.

"What are you doing?"

"Shhh," he soothes. "I'm going to take care of everything. You just lie back and relax."

He finishes the knot above my knee and then reaches for my arm. He makes the same loops just above my elbow and then affixes a knot between my two limbs. He goes to the other side of the bed and does the same with my left arm and knee. When he is finished I am laid open, like a spider on her back with her limbs splayed. Once more, I feel light and free.

Gaius smiles down at his handiwork. Then he leans down and kisses me. A light brush of his lips against mine. I taste myself on his lips. I swallow down the kiss and then arch for more.

He gives me what I want: slowly, languidly kissing me with my legs open, my pussy throbbing, and my nipples tight, achy points. He doesn't touch me anywhere, except his lips against mine, his tongue lapping at mine.

If this goes on, I think I'll come from it. But he breaks the kiss. I gulp down air.

"You were close, weren't you?"

I open my eyes. He's gazing down at me with wonder. I want to be a wonder to him.

"I could watch you come all night, *minou*. I'm going to."

He picks up the brush. Is he going to go back to the easel and paint me? I think I would die of want if he did.

He doesn't move from the bed. Instead of dipping the brush in any paint, he places it on his tongue and licks the bristles. My pussy jumps knowing exactly what that felt like.

Gaius's attention turns from my face to my bared pussy. He tilts his head, regarding my aching labia like I am a work of art he's trying to interpret. Placing the soften bristles against my core, he begins to paint.

“Such a pretty *minou*.”

That’s when I get it. He was never calling me a cat or a kitten. He was calling me another word entirely.

The brush strokes feel nothing like his tongue. His tongue was at times a soft velvet touch, and at others, a stiff tip. The paintbrush has many bristles; soft at the edges and firm at the center. They all touch me at the same time. The bristles are concentrated at my clitoris. The small bud of nerves is having trouble processing all the sensations. It’s going to spontaneously combust any second now.

“Try to hold it for me, *minou*.”

“I can’t,” I pant. “I want it.”

“I’m going to give it to you. Again, and then again. But hold back for now.”

His words make no sense. I don’t try to comprehend. There are too many sensations happening to my body. I can’t close my legs to relieve some. I can’t grab hold of anything to hold onto. I can only feel, and I am overwhelmed.

“Trust me. I know how to take care of you.”

There are those words again. I hold my breath, trying to clamp down on the tingles that are rolling through me. They’re picking up speed and heat and intensity. Pretty soon, those tingles are a blazing, fiery freight train about to burst out of me.

“You’re so beautiful when you’re close. Hold out, *minou*.”

But I can’t. My grip is loosening. One finger lets go. Then another. And then I am crashing, falling, undone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Gaius

I RUN my hands over Marechal's nipples. The tiny jewels scrape against the flesh of my palms. The buds are puckered so hard, they could cut glass.

Her eyes are closed, her head lolling. She is in total bliss, and has been since the sixth orgasm. That was three orgasms ago. One to go.

"Marechal, open your eyes."

Her lids flutter. But they do not open. She is conscious, aware. I have worn her out. However, I know she has more in her.

"Look at me."

Her lids lift, revealing those plum eyes that leave me feeling tipsy every time she glances my way. "Gaius," she sighs, before closing her eyes again.

My chest rises at the reverence she puts in my name. I feel like a king, a conqueror. I've broken many women to my will. Marechal is my greatest prize.

Though I made it bend, there's still steel in her spine. A small smile touches her lips. In it is a smirk of defiance. It tells me that though I may have conquered her body, there's still a reserve inside that I will never touch.

My fingers twitch. My palms itch.

I look again at my handiwork. Her body is perfection in the candlelight. The flame plays off the honey of her skin.

My cock throbs in my pants. But I don't want in her mouth. I want inside of her. I want passage into her core, to tap that reserve.

I haven't fucked a woman's cunt in... I can't remember the last time. For so long, women have only been for food and fun. But this one? This one, I want to see me. This one, I want to speak to me. This one, I want to touch me.

I undo the knots at her knees. My hand trembles as I do so. Once she's free, she could strike out. She could inflict pain upon me. That's what happens after a woman is sated.

For the last hundred years, I've never bothered to test the theory. I have another tend to the aftercare of my playthings. I'm gone before they come out of subspace. But there is no one else here but the two of us. Because I've never taken a woman to my bed... ever.

I didn't want to bring Marechal to the club. For so many reasons. I didn't want any of the others to see my fascination with her. I didn't want them to think she was fair game after I am done with her.

Done with her?

I am not done with her. My throbbing dick tells me so. Still, I untie her.

To let her go?

To see if she'll stay?

To prove she'll strike out?

As I set her hands free, they go limp at her sides. She is far too blissed out to lift even a finger. I look down at this strong woman, who stood toe to toe with me in business matters and didn't flinch. At this moment, I have all the

power. I can do anything to her that I want. She has no power to stop me. She couldn't even form the words to say no. She is powerless. So how does she still hold so much power over me?

I work the kinks out of her legs and arms. I've been edging and tormenting her for hours. Her cunt is a darker shade of red from my abuse with the G-spot dildo and Magic Wand vibrator. As I'd plunged the bulbous head into her over and over again, I'd imagined it was my cock thrusting into her. The thought had made my fangs ache.

They ache now, reminding me I haven't eaten today. I haven't eaten since yesterday, when I first had a taste of Marechal. I know her blood will taste as sweet as her cunt.

"Did I win?"

My gaze shoots to her. Her eyes are still closed. There is a smug grin on her lips.

"Thought you'd tapped out," I say.

"I'm still in it. There's no way I can have another orgasm. My body is numb."

"Challenge accepted."

She chuckles, eyes still closed. She lifts a limp hand. My breath stops at the sight of it. I hold still, motionless as it aims for me.

What will she do? Will she strike me across the face? Will she dig her claws into my nipples? Will she punch my balls?

Marechal's hand lands on my cheek. The soft impact nearly knocks me over. Instead of pulling away as instinct dictates, I lean into her.

"Gaius," she sighs. "Kiss me."

I do. I press my lips to hers. Her body stirs beneath me. Something in the back of my mind wriggles, warning me that this is dangerous. That I will pay for this caress. That pain will follow.

Pleasure blooms inside me as her other hand presses against my chest. I smell her blood racing through her limbs, heating up as I take her lips with mine.

My cock presses against the swollen lips of her cunt. My every instinct tells me to push inside her. But then I would be lost.

I continue to kiss her. I rub my cock against her. I plunge my tongue into her the way I want to work my cock inside her.

Marechal moans into my mouth. She makes no intelligible sound, but I swear I hear her claim me. My hips thrust faster against her; I'm coating myself with her juices.

She breaks the kiss and pulls back. Fear pulls me from her. Is it coming now? The strike for taking these liberties?

"Gaius," she whimpers, throwing her head back as she comes.

I throw my head back as well. I buck against her, letting my seed run between her folds. My balls are empty. I do not have enough blood in me. For the first time in my long life, I feel satiated.

"You win," she says before curling into me and falling asleep.

I hold her to me. No restraints between us. At this moment, I know that I will protect this woman with everything in me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*M*arechal

I FEEL the first rays of the morning touch my cheek. The sun's light isn't soft, it's harsh. When I open my eyes, I see that it is not the morning sunlight that has awakened me. It's late afternoon.

I have slept most of the day away. Nearly all of my workday. But I feel no sense of urgency to rush from Gaius's bed.

I feel tethered to the mattress even though my hands are no longer bound. The memory of his dominance, of his possession, holds me in my place. His absence is what finally gets me to shift into total awareness.

I sit up in the bed. There's not a stitch on me except the soft silk of his sheets. The rich oak smell of his surrounds me.

The frame of his bed is made of wood. It's the wood of a *Quercus robur*, a French oak used to barrel Bordeaux wines. The rich scent has been on my tongue all night. My fingers trace the rings of the carved wood. This tree was old. I can tell by the number of growth rings.

Pinned to the wood is a note. I open it to reveal Gaius's slanted script. My eyes slide over the words, not taking in any meaning the first time I read. I'm too enamored with his handwriting. These days, I don't see much writing in cursive. This is not the cursive I learned in grade school. Gaius's writing calls to the old world, and it's written in French.

Ma petite minou, it begins. I blush now that I know what that word means. The man is brazen to use it as an endearment. But my *minou* warms at the mention.

In the note, he tells me that he didn't want to wake me. He stayed with me as long as he could, but he has obligations for the day. He tells me I'm beautiful. And then the bastard tells me that I snore prettily.

Delight and agitation war within me. I shouldn't feel any of this. The truth is, I don't know what I should be feeling. I experienced more pleasure last night than most women feel in a lifetime. I am no longer in that seventy-five percent of women who don't orgasm. I'm pretty sure I'm now in the top one percentile who can have multiple orgasms. Definitely one of few who have gotten off with a paintbrush.

At the end of the note, he tells me that a driver is waiting outside to take me home. And then he requests the pleasure of my attendance at sundown, like he is some French courtier who is wooing me. The man confounds me. At times, his manners seem so out of place with the present, like he was cut from an ancient cloth. And then in the next moment, he tosses me down and buries his head, or his fingers, or some device, between my thighs and whispers the filthiest things in my ear.

Gaius Serrano does not woo; he takes. He should be done playing with me. What more do I have to offer him?

I dress, pulling on my skirt and shirt from the other day. They are hanging neatly on a closet door. I can't help myself. I peer inside.

It's clear the man likes decadence judging by the expensive fashion in his closet. Everything is name brand with signs of tailoring. There are exquisite paintings on the walls.

Three men dressed in Roman togas standing on a vineyard. The males bear a striking resemblance to the three Serrano brothers. Next to the Roman rendition is a portrait of the same three men, this time in Renaissance flare. They, too, stand in a vineyard. A final painting clearly depicts Gaius and his brothers in suits. But something is off about the suits. They look vintage.

At the bottom of the third painting, I make out a signature. It is in the same script as the note Gaius left me. Did he paint these pictures? The man has some talent. No wonder that paintbrush seduced me.

The silence in the house is eerie. Though it's fully furnished with extravagant decor, it feels like a crypt. A chilly breeze follows me down the halls, like when I'm walking in a graveyard. There's no life moving, but my spirit doesn't feel alone.

Outside the front door is a sleek town car. The driver inside is napping. He rouses to attention when I pull open the back door. I curl into the backseat as he pulls away from the Serrano vineyard, feeling sedate and full of energy at the same time.

Halfway home, I nearly tell the driver to turn around. The closer I get to my property, the less sedate I feel. With each passing mile, a to-do list grows in my head. I turn on my phone to open a checklist app when an alert pops on my screen.

It's an email from my accountant. He's attached a ledger that shows one hundred shares of Durand Vineyard are now in my possession.

I refresh the screen, certain I'm reading that wrong.

But no. There it is. Fifty-five shares were transferred into my name early this morning. Not the five Gaius had

acceded to.

So that's it? We are done? There is no more need to play this game, so why does he want to see me tonight? For the pleasure of my attendance?

The car pulls to a stop outside my home. I climb out of the back before the driver can come around to open the door. Instead of going inside, I trudge around to the vineyard.

It's late in the day. The harvesters are already here, catching a bit of daylight as they begin to pluck the grapes from the vines. They're in the furthest pasture. Looking around, I see that most of the vines are bare of fruit. It normally takes a couple of weeks at least to clear these pastures. At this rate, they'll be done in a couple of days.

I take sure steps on the fertile soil, the stems of my vintage heels never once sticking in the earth. It's as though the vineyard knows I'm back in command.

I pause as I come up to the group of women bent over baskets. They're all dressed in colorful blouses and skirts. Each of their hair is a plaited braid of ebony. All of their skin is a dark honey gold, a few shades richer than mine.

The woman closest to me lifts her head and meets my gaze. She is older. I can only tell that by the crow's feet at the edges of her eyes. She has no gray, and no wrinkles otherwise. She simply looks as though she's seen far more years than her fit body lets on.

She opens her mouth to speak, but a male voice cuts her off.

"Yes, Ms. Durand? What can I do for you?"

I turn to see one of the few males who have come with the group this harvest. The men, too, all share the same ebony hair with plaits. Though they don't dress in such colorful clothing. Unlike the women, the males all wear dark pants and dark t-shirts. They look more like a security detail than migrant workers. I'm fairly certain this is the same man who spoke so tersely to me just a few days ago.

“Where’s Zahara?” I ask, wanting to take the man down a notch, but also, not wanting to give him the time of day. I shouldn’t fire him just because I think he’s a chauvinist pig.

I could, though. Because I’m the boss.

“Zahara is indisposed today.”

I don’t like the tone of his voice. He makes the word *indisposed* sound like she’s been a naughty girl and is in time out.

“I have a business matter to discuss with her,” I say.

“You can deal with me.”

“I prefer to speak with management,” I say, looking him up and down. “Not the middle man.”

The sun is setting but I feel a wave of heat brush my shoulders. A low growl sounds from somewhere close. There are mountain lions in these parts. A few jaguars have been known to walk the land as well. But too many humans dot the fields for them to make an appearance.

When I give the man before me back my attention, his eyes are narrowed slits. His mouth is pinched in disgust. His nose is wrinkled as though he smells something foul on my person.

He opens his mouth to speak, his lips set in a snarl. But a feminine voice cuts him off.

“Zahara isn’t feeling well today, Ms. Durand,” says the older woman—Itzel, I believe her name is. She’s still on the ground, her head down, her gaze averted. “She is resting.”

I don’t believe Itzel. But it’s clear she’s trying to break the tension between me and the male. I also get the sense that she’s trying to protect Zahara. If I find out it’s from this man, I will not hesitate to call the authorities. I know Zahara has all the correct paperwork to be here. I don’t know about this man, and I couldn’t care less if he ends up in an ICE detention facility with his attitude.

“When Zahara is feeling better, would you tell her that I’d like to see her?”

It's a furtive move, but I see her glance out the corner of her eye at the male. "Of course, Ms. Durand."

I plaster on a friendly, non-combative smile. It makes my teeth hurt. "Thank you both. Thank you all for the hard work you've done this season. I couldn't have done it without you."

The man's shoulders relax a fraction in response to my dulcet tones. He nods and then turns on his heel, but he doesn't go far.

I bend down to examine a vine. My gaze fixed on the plant, I pitch my voice. "If she's in trouble, you can tell me. I'll help."

A small smile plays at Itzel's mouth. It reminds me so much of Zahara's hard-won grins. I wonder if this is her aunt?

"It's nothing like that," she says. Her gaze turns discerning, as though she's trying to determine if she can reveal a secret. "Zahara is expecting."

Oh? That's not what I was expecting to hear. My gaze slides over to the man. He has his back to us, but I get the eerie feeling that he can hear us even though we are whispering.

"Does she need anything?" I try to push every possible meaning into that one word.

"No." Itzel smiles sadly. "She is simply doing what she was born to do."

I don't believe that. I don't believe that women were solely born to bear children. But I've stepped on enough cultural norms today.

I make my way back to the house. I don't have much time before the sun sets and my own gentleman will come calling. There's mounds of paperwork to do and plans to make now that the business is back under my full control.

Instead of going to my office, I decide to take the rest of the day off. The notion of taking a rare day to myself isn't

what surprises me. The fact that I don't feel an ounce of guilt does.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Gaius

"I'D RATHER A WITCH OVER A SHAMAN," I say.

"I'd rather neither," says Hadrian.

I've told my brothers of the magical interference happening in our vine roots. We knew the previous owner had had problems with his crops, but we'd assumed it was due to his own ignorance. Together, my brothers and I have hundreds of years of knowledge and experience making all terrains of soil yield to our will. But this is our first curse.

"If we do nothing, the entire crop will die. We'll lose millions."

"We have billions." Hadrian shrugs. "Besides, I'd rather go home. This Arizona dry heat makes me itch."

"Do you think Cari will want to leave her sister?"

Hadrian grinds his molars. He's too busy teeth-gnashing to see that my hand balls into a fist at the thought of leaving Cari's sister. The sun set over an hour ago, and I'm itching to get to Marechal. But family first.

"The Alpha wolf in these territories is mated to a seer," I say. "I'll reach out through Frangelico, see if she can help us."

"Fine." Hadrian pushes off his chair. "If that's all—"

"That is not all." I raise my hand to stay him. "There is still the matter of the upcoming festivities at Club Toxic."

Hadrian slumps back in his chair with a huff. I look to Virius on the other side of the room.

"I won't go," Viri huffs. He sits on a wine barrel and crosses his arms over his chest. "You know I hate parties."

I try to rein in my annoyance at my brother. Viri would look like a petulant child if he weren't dressed in jeans and cowboy chaps, and a t-shirt that depicts Crazy Horse, a Native American legend. As usual, the top half of his attire is at odds with the bottom half. Sending him as an emissary to greet a congregation of vampire royalty is not the best idea, but it's the only one I have.

"Someone needs to greet the envoy," I say.

"Send Hadrian," says Viri.

"He has to watch Cari."

"I can watch Cari," said Viri.

From the corner of the room, Hadrian growls at that. Newly mated vampires do not take well to other males being alone with their women. Not even their brothers.

"What?" says Viri. "You think I'll fuck her? I lost my taste for cunt after the last Inquisition. I haven't had a cockstand in two centuries. I think it might be broken."

Viri tugs at the waistband of his jeans and peers inside.

"Do not take that out," I warn.

"He needs to look at it and see for himself," Viri says in his most helpful tone.

Hadrian hops up from the chair and backs away. Viri follows his brother around the room, holding his junk for inspection.

"I'm not looking at your prick," Hadrian shouts.

"It's not even hard enough to prick something," Viri insists. "Look. See for yourself. I'm no threat to Cari."

"Put it away, Virius."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. This is my life. For the last couple of centuries, I'd been the only one interested in cunt. Both Hadrian and Virius were too broken to even look at women. Now, I have no interest in any cunt but one.

I let my mind drift back to just before dawn. I'd stayed up as long as possible, watching Marechal sleep. Hers was the slumber of a very satisfied woman.

I couldn't sleep at all. I could hardly blink. I didn't want to miss a second of her lying in my bed.

With her comatose, I took her hand and pressed it to my face. Her fingertips weren't all softness. There were a few ridges from hard work.

As she dozed, I ran her fingertips over my forehead. Pressed them against my eyelids. Held them to my lips. I could not get enough of her touch, and while she slept, I allowed myself to overdose on the sensations.

How had I lived centuries without this feeling? Letting my cheek rest in the palm of her hand, I felt certain I could fall asleep just like that. I didn't. I didn't want to miss a second of the feeling.

So I simply lay there with her. Holding her hand to me. Gazing down upon her softened features. Listening to the soft snore that tickled her nostrils.

Once day began to break, I held out for as long as possible. But the sun's pull was powerful. I rose from the bed and crawled under it. Slipping into my crypt beneath the bed, I could still smell her. With the scent of her in my nostrils, I slipped into my first dreamless sleep in years.

"If Cari touched my cock, it would glide against her hand. Not prick her."

Hadrian, who had been tracing away from Viri, halts. He becomes fully corporeal as he does an about-face. "You want to rub your tiny dick on my woman?"

“My dick isn’t tiny. You’d know, if you took a moment to look at it.”

Hadrian roars, preparing to pounce on his brother. I trace between the two, placing a firm hand on Hadrian’s chest to keep him from murdering Virius. I take care not to touch Viri anywhere at the moment. Hadrian’s fangs are dripping. Virius is too busy eyeing his junk to notice.

“New idea,” I say. “Hadrian, why don’t you take Cari, and the two of you go to greet the envoy?”

Hadrian takes a deep breath, putting his fangs away. Virius looks up, finally putting his junk back in his jeans.

“I don’t know,” says Hadrian. “She’s still so young.”

“She’ll be around other shifters and vampires,” I say. “She can’t hurt them. Much.”

We have only been in the country for less than a year, but every supernatural creature has heard of Lucius Frangelico’s *All Soul’s* events. The parties at his club are legendary, calling vampire royalty from all over the world to come to see for themselves.

Since Frangelico is heading out of town on a honeymoon with his new bride, he asked that we help his lieutenants greet some of that royalty. Any other time, I would be delighted to play politics with the high-fanged. But my attention is diverted.

Partly to the issue of our rotting vines.

Mostly to when I can get my hands back on Marechal Durand. And have her hands on me.

“All this so you can stay and check on the vines?” says Hadrian.

“He’s not checking on the vines. He’s going to wet his wick with Marechal.” Virius goes to the fridge behind the bar and rummages through the blood bags in there. “Didn’t you hear them last night?”

Now I want to chase the man around the room, but I doubt Hadrian will hold me back. Because Hadrian will likely be chasing after me.

"I told you not to toy with Marechal," says Hadrian. "She's your sister."

I hold up my hand, palm facing out, to halt that nonsense. "Marechal is not my sister. She's..."

The two males wait for me to finish. Hadrian crosses his arms over his chest like he's preparing to protect his bride's sister. Viri holds the blood bag to his lips, as though preparing for a toast.

I lose the train of my sentence. I'm not sure where I was just headed. I don't have the word for what Marechal is to me.

"If you hurt Cari's sister, you will be hearing about it from her for centuries," says Hadrian. "This is why I told you not to toy with Marechal."

"I'm not toying with her," I insist.

"He's not," Viri agrees. "She slept here last night. In his bed. With him beside her. And she wasn't tied down."

I turn on Viri. "You spied on us."

Viri shrugs. "I had a nightmare."

My compassion for my brother wars with my ire at him coming into my room when I was with Marechal. Though I'm not sure when he did. I was awake nearly all night.

"You didn't hear me when I came in," Viri says after a swig of the blood bag. "You were asleep. I've never seen you sleep that deeply. I've never seen you sleep with someone. Other than the times Domitia crucified you to the bed, of course."

A shudder goes through the room at the mention of her name. Hadrian rubs the black ring on his left finger. Cari had insisted on wedding rings. Viri downs the rest of the blood. I scratch at my palms, remembering what the stakes felt like when Domitia had pinned me down.

"That's the second time Marechal was here," says Hadrian. "You never do repeats."

I don't. There are far too many women to sample. And here I am, anxious to return to this one tonight. So much so

that I'm willing to neglect my duties.

"What's going on with you?" Hadrian looks me in the eye. From the rise of his brow, I know I'm not hiding my feelings.

"I just want her again. I didn't get enough the last time."

"Of her blood?"

"I didn't drink from her. I just... want to be with her."

To feel her underneath me. To feel her hands on me. To be inside her.

My two brothers eye me. Not with suspicion. Not with pity. With awe.

"What?" I say.

"Do you think... could this be..." But Hadrian trails off.

"What?" I demand.

"He thinks you're falling in love with her," says Viri.

The sound of something crashing outside the door turns all our heads around.

"That would be Cari," says Hadrian. "She's probably calling Marechal right now. You won't catch her. Best to go face Marechal with this."

But is that what I'm feeling? Love? I've never felt the like before. Not for anyone but my brothers.

For them, I would run into certain danger. I would give my last drop of blood. I would face the sun.

Would I do the same for Marechal?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*M*arechal

AS I SWIRL the liquid in my glass, the dark red of the wine catches the light. The taste on my tongue is bold, lusty, full-bodied, yet somehow clean and pure. There's a depth to the Serrano vintage that can only be brought forth by time and age.

With my right hand, I lift the glass to my mouth for another sip. With my left, I lift the vine to glance at the plant. It's been out of the dirt for days now, and it shows no sign of dying.

There are techniques to pluck the vines from the ground, then air-dry them for months, causing the plants to shrivel—much like hanging dried flowers for decorative purposes. When done with a grapevine, the technique causes the grape to lose its water mass, which increases the alcohol content of the resulting wine.

The Serrano vine, whose grapes haven't even flowered, isn't shriveling. It hasn't lost any water mass since I plucked it the other night. The pimple-like splotches are increasing. In fact, they look like they're growing, like the disease is

spreading, along with the plant that isn't receiving any sunlight or nutrients from the earth.

It should not be possible. But the facts are in the palm of my hand. No science supports what I am witnessing. Could this be the curse Zahara spoke of? It wouldn't matter if it is. I don't believe in magic.

I take another sip of the red wine. It hits my tongue chilled but quickly warms, spreading a buzzing heat through my mouth that slides down my tongue. Images of Gaius sipping from my lips, delving his tongue inside me—everywhere—light my mind.

The memory of his fingers on my flesh brings goosebumps to my arms. Tingles ripple across my legs. Embers spark between my thighs.

I remind myself that I do not believe in magic. But the simple thought of that man calls me a liar.

I raise the glass to my mouth again, eager for more of the sensation. The glass is fully empty. I could pour another from the bottle, which is half full.

Gaius's note said he'd be here at sunset. That was over an hour ago. I was never the type of woman to wait on a man. I was always too busy to be bothered.

However, today, I took the day off. I walked past the stack of paperwork on my desk. I turned off the office phone's ringer and let all calls go to voicemail. I kicked off my shoes, pulled up a lounge chair on the back porch, and simply sat all day. Looking out at the vineyard, my vineyard, as the clouds moved across the sky and the sun sank was the most peaceful day of my existence.

I am back in control. I am back in charge of my life. There is no one to tell me what to do or—

My cellphone's ring is shrill in the quiet of the night. I drop the wineglass as I dive for it. The glass cracks but it doesn't shatter.

"Mare?"

"Oh. *Coucou*, Carignan." This past year, the sound of my sister's voice over the phone only brought worry. This is the first time it's brought disappointment.

"Hey there, yourself."

"How are you, *mon chou*? Where are you?"

"I'm at home."

That gets my attention. I sit up in the chair, whirling around as though I can see her coming into the house. "You're here?"

"No—no," she stutters. "I mean, I'm back in the room. At my hotel. With Hadrian. We spent the day out."

I can tell my sister is lying to me. Cari has never been one for minute details unless she's telling a story. Why is she lying now when she says she's so happy in her new life? Likely the same reason I started drinking after the sun went down and there was no ring at my doorbell of a French gentleman coming to request my attendance.

"Mare, listen." Cari's voice takes on the rushed, squealing quality from when she was back in high school, on the phone gossiping with her little girlfriends. "I overheard Hadrian talking to Gaius."

"What did I tell you about eavesdropping?" It's so easy to slip back into maternal mode, even though I'm dying to know what Gaius said. "Wait, is Gaius with you two?" Is that why he didn't show at sundown?

"No. They were talking on the phone. Hadrian was on his cell phone. He had it on speaker. While I was in another room—the bathroom. So I overheard."

Lots of detail. Another lie.

"They were talking about you, Mare."

Cari lets the silence linger. I bite my lip, warring between finding the lie and learning the details.

"But you're right," Cari singsongs. "You did raise me not to gossip. So..."

"Spill it, you little brat."

Cari giggles. I realize how much I've missed that sound. For the past year, since our father died, I haven't seen my sister smile. I definitely haven't heard her laugh. She's hiding something, but her happiness is real. I'll get the truth out of her later. Right now I need her to spill the T.

"He really likes you, Mare. Like, *likes you* likes you."

I try to swallow. "What exactly did you hear?"

"I know you slept in his bed last night."

My forehead connects with my palm as I groan. So, Gaius is a kisser as well as a teller.

"No, no, Mare. You don't understand. Gaius is a player —"

"That, I understand."

"He doesn't sleep with women. He screws them. Usually at the club—"

"What club?"

"—but he never brings them home. Or sleeps with them, like lying down in the same bed. He did that with you."

I'm not sure what to think about all this. The man I'm interested in is a confirmed player, who apparently screws women in a club, and has never committed. On the flip side, I'm practically a prude, who rarely leaves her vineyard and has never cared enough to engage in a relationship. Don't we sound perfect for each other.

"Gaius told Hadrian he couldn't get enough of you. Hadrian thinks he might be falling in love with you."

I forget how to breathe. I swallow, and the sweet tang of the Serrano red wine left on my tongue goes straight to my head.

"It's possible, Mare. It happened fast with me and Hadrian. He said he knew the first time he saw me that I would be his."

My mind latches onto those words. The possessiveness of them. Thinking of the words coming from Hadrian's mouth in reference to my sister draw my ire. But when Hadrian's

face and voice are replaced with Gaius referencing me, my heart is in my throat.

“The two of you are so alike. Gaius has held his brothers together through some truly awful things in their lives. You’ve done the same for me and Arneis. I think you two deserve each other. You need to let someone else take care of you for a change.”

A sense of peace rushes over me at the thought of Gaius taking charge of me. My head feels light, which is apt, as all the worries have skirted away. My shoulders settle back into the chair; not an ounce of heaviness touches them. When I look up out into the moonlit sky, I see a dark form walking towards me.

My every instinct is to run to the man. To fall down on my knees when I get to him. To spread my thighs and offer him passage into the deepest, most secret part of me.

“I’ve gotta go, Cari. He’s here.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Gaius

I WALKED ALL the way here. But walking is a relative term for someone like me. My feet moved fast across the varied lands. Crunching swiftly over dry patches of desert, then squishing into fertile pastures. Neither the cracked earth nor the lush terrain slowed me down in my efforts to get to Marechal.

Cari had just picked up the phone when I'd left the house. She and her sister's conversation couldn't have taken more than five minutes, even though we live a twenty-minute drive distance from each other. I hear Marechal's voice before I see her. When she comes into my line of sight, she steals my breath.

Marechal sits barefoot in a lounge chair. Instead of her usual fitted skirt and buttoned-up shirt, she's wearing a white sundress. Her dark hair is loose around her shoulders. Her face is devoid of any makeup. She looks like a virginal sacrifice. I am the monster who will most certainly lay her out on an altar and feast on her this night.

My feet move steadily towards my prize, the treasure that I covet. I'm barely aware of the plants, animals, or other beings around me. Barely aware, but not entirely oblivious.

It's the stillness of the night that catches my attention. The vineyard should be teeming with the sounds of nightcrawlers. Squirrels, raccoons, rabbits, possum, maybe even a few deer should be poking around in this lush buffet now that the sun has gone down. I scent not a hair or bushy tail. Yet eyes flash at me in the dark.

Eyes at eye level. Not from the ground or under bushes.

A couple dozen women stare at me from the rows of vines. They all have baskets in their arms and ripe grapes in their hands. Cari mentioned that the Durands had moved to night harvesting a few years ago. What she didn't mention—because as a human she will not have known—was the fact that her workers are shifters.

Vampires and shifters have a contentious relationship at the best of times, blood-soaked at the worst. The majority of shifter species aren't at the top of the predatory chain. There are plenty of foxes, minxes, and high-tailed bunnies who play at Club Toxic. But there are wolves, bears, and lions that make their home in these parts as well.

Lucius struck a deal with the alpha of this territory not long ago. I get another whiff of these women and I note they do not smell like wolves. I can't place their breed, and I don't intend to ask.

Not a single one takes a defensive stance as I approach. They make no signs of aggression. But neither do I smell an ounce of fear on them.

From the darkness of their hair, the rich tan of their complexions, and the patterns on their colorful clothing, I assume they are Native American. I don't know much about the tribes here, having been born in sixteenth-century Europe. I wonder if they know anything about the magics in

my soil? They likely do. Due to their tight-lipped and watchful expressions, I doubt they'll clue me in.

That's a matter for another night. Tonight, my business is with the mistress of this land. From what I can see of the cleared vines, these workers are loyal to Marechal. Or perhaps to her money. I don't sense they mean her any harm. They're likely just here for the paycheck. We supernatural beings still need to work for our living.

Right now, I just want to live in this moment with the angel on the porch.

"I think you two deserve each other." Cari's voice is clear to me over the phone line, as if she's standing next to my ear. "You need to let someone else take care of you for a change."

"I've gotta go, Cari. He's here."

I have seen women naked. I have seen them in artfully placed strips of fabric that draw the eye. I have seen them bound by rope. I have seen them dripping with my cum all over their faces and breasts. The sight of Marechal, flushed, and mostly covered, has my dick instantly hard.

"Hello," she says. "You said sundown. I wasn't sure you were—"

I stop her talking with my mouth. I'm leaning down over her, crowding her in the chair. She lets her head tilt back, offering me her surrender as I wrap my arms around her. I lift her to me as I plunge my tongue into her mouth. Her ass is not a perfect fit in my palms. Some of her flesh spills over my fingers. I need to sink my fangs into that excess soon.

"Which way to your bedroom?" I demand.

"Down the hall and to the left."

I slide the glass door open and step inside. Though I know there is a potential threat outside, I don't bother to close it. A slab of wood and a lock is nothing to a supernatural being. If anyone or any being dares interrupt what I am about to do to this woman, they do it at their

peril. I will gut any man, woman, or beast who tries to come between us.

I try to keep my steps slow as I make my way through the house. I fail. Marechal doesn't notice the speed at which we move as she reclaims my mouth. Her nails dig into my scalp. Her feet lock at my lower back. Her hard nipples poke through the fabric of her dress.

My eyes are closed as I feel my way through the maze of halls. All of my attention is on Marechal's lips as I revel in the sensation of her lips against mine. How have I spent so many years without kissing? Suckling Marechal's mouth is nearly as good as licking her sweet cunt. I'll need to make a full comparison, noting the pros and cons of each set of her lips. But that will have to be later.

Once in her room, I toss her onto the bed. She lands with a thud. The fabric of her dress rides up her thighs. My fingers itch to rend the material into strips and tie her down.

I'm distracted when she places her hands over her head and parts her thighs for me, the dark space there beckoning me in. The position of surrender threatens to bring me to my knees.

Here lies the strongest woman I've ever met, and she offers me her submission. No command. No restraints. No deals or ultimatums.

It's a gift. A blessing. A treasure.

I place one knee on the bed. Then the other. Instead of reaching for her, I sink back on my haunches. I have the urge to say a prayer of gratitude.

I have never been a religious man, even though I served during the Inquisition. I tortured men, not for their confessions, but for my own sustenance. I used my skills to get women to confess to crimes they didn't even understand, let alone commit, so that I could make their veins thick with the endorphins of sweet blood.

And for all my sins, Fates has delivered me benediction.

"Are you going to tie me up?"

"No," I whisper. "I'm going to worship your body. Will you hold still for me, *minou*?"

"No." She grins, biting her lip. "I'm going to hold on to you."

She reaches for me then. I swallow hard, holding myself as still as possible. My heart races as she lifts up. My breath quickens as her fingers come slowly towards me. Her palm connects with my jaw, and I gasp. Marechal's flesh against my face is the softest thing I have ever felt in my life.

She cups my face in her hands and kisses me. A small brush of her lips against mine, and I am undone.

She could flay my skin and I would let her. I would welcome the pain. But all her fingertips deliver is pleasure.

"Are you okay?"

She asks because I am shivering. I cannot hide it. I cannot stop it.

Marechal's hand moves to my chest. My heart thumps against its cage, desperate to reach her. I cover her hand with my own and press her palm to feel its beat.

"I want you inside of me," she says.

Does she understand that I need the same thing? With her hand on my chest, Marechal gives me a shove. She is only human, but the nudge knocks me over. My back meets the bed, and she climbs on top of me.

I have never been on the bottom in sex. I have never allowed any woman to place me in this position, not even Domitia. With Marechal on top of me, I reach my hands behind my head, grabbing onto the headboard, preparing to let this woman have her way with me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

*M*arechal

I HAVE no idea what I'm doing when I straddle Gaius's hips. I have never been in this position before. I have had power over men in academic situations, in social situations, in business. But I have never been in charge in bed.

I start with what would be practical. For sex to happen, clothes should be off. That is logical.

I grab for the hem of my sundress. The fabric whispers over my thighs as it rises up. Gaius doesn't help. He lies back and watches me, lips pursed as he holds his breath, fists clenched as he withholds his touch.

My fingers shake as I pull the dress over my head. I'm not scared. Or nervous. I want this. I want it so bad, I'm shaking for it.

When I pop the clasp of my bra, my chest heaves a sigh. My nipples point at what they want. Gaius licks his lips, but he doesn't lean in. Is he purposefully denying himself? Does he want me to deny him as he did me? To bring him to the edge again and again before letting him fall over into bliss?

If so, it's too bad. I'm not playing that game. I'm going to run to the edge this time, and jump off. And I'm taking him with me. If my damn fingers can work the buttons of his shirt.

He smirks at my frustration but makes no move to help. With desperate hands, I rip the rest of the shirt open. Knowing Gaius, it cost a small fortune. He only chuckles at its destruction.

I stand when I tug his pants from his legs. With his long legs, it feels like it takes forever for them to pick up the slack and get to the end. He's commando underneath all those layers. I take a moment and simply gaze down at the length of him, as well as the *length* of him.

Am I really about to put all of that inside of me?

"Viens ici, mon minou."

I do. I go to him. I climb back onto my bed. I crawl over his large feet. I scale the length of his thighs. I rise up the range of his chest. When I come face to face with him, I have arrived.

All of the fighting I've done to earn my place in life, all the battles I've waged to be seen and heard, all of my struggles to keep it together—my family, this business, my sense of self—all of it was to get me to this moment with this man.

Looking down at Gaius, I get the sense he feels the same way. We are both open. Our defenses are down. He could gut me in this moment. I could hurt him too.

Cari said Gaius was the glue of his family, the backbone of their business. Like me. We've both left those worries outside the door.

Right now, right here, there's only the two of us. The trust between us is a fragile thread, but it's there. The fibers are strong enough to hold us together in this moment. We both reach for it at the same time. Our fingers come away entwined, our lips together.

The kiss is brutal; thorough. Gaius sips at my soul. His tongue penetrates so deeply that I can feel the pulls deep in my core. Can I orgasm just from his kiss? I bet he could make me.

I need more of him than just his tongue or his hands. I want that big cock inside of me. His hard length tickles my belly button. The tip is giving me a wet kiss of its own.

I lift my hips, angling to get the long rod between my thighs. I have to rise all the way up on my knees to accomplish the feat. Once his cock is inside me and he has his tongue down my throat, I wonder if the two would meet?

I position his head between my intimate curls. I'm so wet with excitement that the thick head slips easily inside me. The launch was the easy part. The landing is not so much bumpy as it is long. I won't get to see if his tongue and dick are long enough to meet inside me because he breaks the kiss.

"Merde," Gaius hisses.

His hands halt my descent. His fingers dig into my hips as he breathes hard.

I'm breathing hard, too, but it's because I want more. I want all of him. I wriggle my hips for my access but he curses again.

"I just forgot what this feels like," he says. "I haven't been inside a woman in centuries."

"What?"

His words make no sense. He doesn't bother explaining them. Instead, he claims my mouth again and I forget what he said.

I let out a long sigh when he is fully seated in me. I can feel him everywhere. In the curl of my toes. In the scrape of my nipples against his chest. Underneath my fingernails, which make half-moons in his back.

I could stay like this all night; Gaius filling me up to my eyelids. It's the first time in my life that I've known

contentment. But the throbbing length inside me wants movement, which brings me back to my initial conundrum.

I have no idea what I'm doing when I straddle Gaius's hips.

The control he'd lent me was short-lived. It ran out the moment I put the tip in. His hands lift my hips. I moan in protest as his hardness recedes. I scream in surrender as he thrusts into me.

One hand is a piston on my ass, pumping me up and down his shaft. With the other, he rubs my clit in light, leisurely circles that are at odds with his hard thrusts. The polar sensations pull me apart, and I'm coming before my mind understands what's happening.

The orgasms Gaius had given me before this were with his fingers, with his tongue, with the bristles of a paintbrush. This time, his firm mass is inside of me. My muscles clench around solid steel, and my entire being rings like I am a bell.

Still pumping in and out of me, Gaius shoves one, then two fingers inside me. There should be no room, but he makes it so. His cock thrusts, then his fingers. Into the impossibly full space, he forces a third digit. It hooks up, hitting a bundle of nerves at the front of my sex.

I'm trembling, shaking, unintelligible when I come next.

My upper body collapses down atop him. He lies back with me in his arms, but he doesn't miss a single thrust. His fingers leave my quaking pussy and circle round to my ass. Gaius's seeking fingers rub at the puckered hole there.

He can't be thinking... and then he does. He presses a finger into my asshole.

His cock fills my channel. His tongue thrusts into my mouth. His finger pumps into my ass. I am invaded, and again, I surrender.

This time when I come, Gaius halts his thrusts. I am sitting on his cock, on his finger, filled to the brim as I moan into his mouth and he swallows down my cries.

But he is not done. When my shivers ease, Gaius lifts me off his cock. Like my hips are nothing more than a serving dish, he sets my pussy up to his face. Parting the swollen lips between my thighs, he sets my clit on his tongue as though it were an *amuse-bouche*. His eyes never leaving me, he laves at me until I come again.

Before I come down, he's shifted me back to his cock.

"Touch yourself," he commands.

I do as I'm told. My fingers glide over my sex, feeling the softness of my flesh and the hard ridges of his.

His hands are cupping my ass, making me thrust against him, harder. Harder. My hips buck out of control. I am mindless, my body moving out of instinct.

Gaius yanks my hands away. Without my palm against this chest for balance, I fall into him. This is what he wanted.

He crushes me to his chest. He wraps my arms behind my back, holding them there in a vice. Then he bucks into me, even harder.

His free hand goes to my hair. He grabs fistfuls and tugs my head back, exposing my neck as he bucks into me. The slapping of his hips, of his dick into my welcoming wetness, is music in my ears. That, and my cries of mindless pleasure.

I have nothing to hold on to. He has me trapped on top of him. Here I thought I would take control of the situation, but this man has taken control of me entirely. If there was more of myself that I could give to him, I'd hand it over with a *merci beaucoup*.

And still, he's thrusting into me. His pumping hasn't let up. Not once. Not even now as I come again.

My entire body seizes around him. I come so hard that I wonder if I've died. The trembling never stops, not even when I fall limp onto the bed.

My back goes against the cushion of the bed. Gaius climbs on top of me. I want to reach out to him, to hold him

to me. But I can't move a muscle.

He parts my thighs, bringing his hips between mine. I feel him enter me. The broadness of his cock is not one that could ever be ignored, no matter how spent I am.

He slides in and out of me. Slower now. Controlled. But deeper. It's as though he's trying to get to my heart through my pussy. I wish I could open wider for him. I wish I could clear the path of every organ and blood vessel that was in the way.

I can only open my eyes and gaze up at him. He looks like a man lost. Not lost in a place. It's clear he knows where he is. He just seems lost as to how to get where he's going.

I find the strength to lift my hand to his cheek. I caress his strong jaw. Gaius closes his eyes. The most exquisite look of pleasure and pain crosses his features as he shouts a guttural cry. His body bucks into mine. I realize then, it's the first time he's come all night. He collapses down onto me, and allows me to hold him in my arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Gaius

"I CAN'T FEEL MY TOES."

Marechal might not be able to feel her toes, but I can. Her warm flesh rubs up and down the inside of my calf. Instead of pulling away from the intimate touch, I roll into her, needing to feel more of her against me.

"You're still speaking," I say. "Which means I haven't done my job properly."

"Oh, no." Her eyes go wide with shock but also desire. "I can not have another orgasm. My body can't take it."

I rise up on one elbow, gazing down at her. She is bare and bruised. Her lips are red from my kisses, her cunt swollen from my thrusts. "Are you telling me no, *minou*?"

She gulps. "Gaius..."

My dick stirs again. I've fucked her for hours until she went limp, and then I right alongside her. Yet, here I am again, getting hard for her. "I think I'm going to fuck you until you pass out."

I reach for her. For a woman who has been thoroughly fucked, she moves a little too fast for my liking. I could easily catch her, but where would the fun be in that? She giggles when I do catch her. The sound is a delight to my black soul.

"Is that your kink?" she says from within the cage of my arms. The amusement in her eyes shifts and shines brighter. "You liked it when I was so blissed out that I couldn't move. That's when you came."

I let out a slow sigh. Already, I've bared more than I am comfortable to this woman. She still claws for more. Her hand comes to rest on my cheek. I flinch at her touch, but only slightly. Of course, she catches the movement. But being Marechal, she comes at it from a different angle.

"Cari said you take care of your brothers. Who takes care of you?"

"The same person who takes care of all your needs in the small cracks of time you give to yourself."

The light in her eyes dims as it turns inward. I want to take it back. I want to be the one who causes her to be light. I want to put her on my care list—possibly even above the care of my brothers.

No, not possibly. Definitely above the care of my brothers. I want to take every care from this woman and make it my own so that she doesn't have a single burden. I want her to know that my back is strong enough to bear everything she can give me, and then some.

"Do you think, maybe, we could take care of each other?" Marechal's fingers glide down my chin.

I hadn't thought of that. I hadn't considered that maybe she would offer to carry some of my load. No one has ever done that for me.

If ever anyone could handle all that I am, it would be Marechal Durand. But to make that happen, I would have to take her life and give her a new one. Am I ready for that?

The sun will be up in a few hours. The thought of being parted from her is an anathema in my chest. I want her with me when it's light, to keep her safe from the brightness.

My brothers think I'm falling in love with this woman. I don't know about that. I've seen the expression in art, heard about it in songs, read about it in poetry. In real life? I don't know what it means.

All I know is I want to protect this woman. I want to ease her burdens. I want to give her pleasure. I want her to turn to me in her time of need. And... it would be nice if perhaps I could turn to her if ever I needed to, as well.

It's too much to think about. It's too heavy to deal with. Right now, I just want to make her moan. I just want to lose myself in her in the time I have left before sunrise. I just want to sink my fangs into her and sate my thirst.

It's been days since I've eaten. Bagged blood held no appeal. Another woman wasn't even on the table. I just want her.

So, I take her.

I duck my head out of her gentle caress. With rough hands, I flip Marechal onto her back. After a gasp of surprise, she lets out a delighted scream.

I part her thighs. I can smell the blood pumping in her femoral artery. I'll give her another orgasm and then take a quick drink. I know hers will be the sweetest blood I've ever drunk. Holding my aching fangs at bay, I've dipped my head to begin my attack when the bedroom door bangs open.

I don't think. I react. I fly from the bed and have the intruder in my clutches in a blink. My fangs are bared. My claws are in his neck.

"Gaius, no."

Marechal's voice is a faint plea in my ears. But the rage flowing through me is too loud. Tiny points of blood trickle down my victim's neck from the indents of my nails. My nostrils flare as I note that his blood smells similar to

Marechal's. His wide eyes are the same dark plum color as her own.

Arneis Durand gasps as he tears at my hand around his throat. A slight fog from his eyes is clearing even as I choke the life out of him. The fog is one I put there myself, just a few days ago, when I wiped his mind of the memory of the car crash he'd been in with Cari. And then of Domitia drinking his blood. And also of Hadrian feeding Arneis his vampiric blood to save the man's life.

As Arneis stares at me, terror in his eyes, all those sealed memories are coming unlocked. I could put him in thrall again, willing him to forget the last five seconds. But memory wiping is a delicate business. And there's the matter of his sister scrambling behind us.

"Gaius, let him go."

I let him down. Arneis wobbles as his feet touch the ground. His eyes blink rapidly, trying to focus. And then his entire body slumps to the ground.

Marechal rushes past me. She is wrapped in bedsheets as she bends over her brother. "Arnei? Are you okay?"

Arneis closes his eyes and gulps down lungfuls of air. When he opens them again he continues to blink rapidly, trying to pull his thoughts into focus.

"What did you do to him?" Marechal's gaze turns to me. Her tone is accusatory.

"I thought he was an attacker," I say. "He burst in."

"This is his home," she says, running her hands over her brother's face just as she had done mine moments ago. "*Mon ami*, look at me. Can you breathe?"

He's breathing fine. He'll be fine. It's his memories I worry about.

Arneis's gaze locks on his sister, then shifts and focuses on me. "You monster," he whispers.

And there it is. Arneis's memories are unlocked. I'm about to be shoved out of the supernatural closet before I'm ready.

I'll have to fess up to Marechal, which has consequences I'm not sure I'm ready for. Or I'll have to wipe both their minds, which I know I'm not prepared to do.

I don't want Marechal to forget a single second of what we shared. Those memories are too precious, and I don't want to hold them alone. I want her to carry them with me. On into the morning, and into tomorrow night. Maybe forever.

"Arneis, you can't just barge into my room like this."

The sound of bossy Marechal makes my dick hard again. I want to dare her to speak to me like that. Just so I can dole out the consequences on that perfect ass.

"I thought he was hurting you," Arneis says. "Like he hurt Cari."

"Cari's fine," I say. "And Marechal was enjoying what I was doing to her before you interrupted."

"Don't help." Marechal holds a finger up at me, and my fangs throb.

Arneis shakes his head. Perhaps trying to clear it? Perhaps trying to shake more memories into view? "They took her from us. I was driving her away from them, and then she dropped out of the sky and took her from us."

Arneis points an accusatory finger at me. But the finger is shaky. The fear in his eyes tells me it's not my face he's seeing. It's Domitia's. I'm a centuries-old supernatural being, and just the thought of her stops my dead heart.

"Gaius, why don't you go?"

Me? Go? As in leave Marechal? That is the last thing I'm going to do.

"My brother is still having trouble from the accident. He hit his head, and... concussions are hard."

Arneis holds his head in his hand. It's not a concussion that's causing the confusion.

"I'll stay," I say.

Marechal shakes her head as she stands. She places her hand on my chest. Had she been another woman, I would've

caught her wrist and then turned her over my knee for daring to take such a liberty. But my heart leaps at her touch and I step closer to her.

“This is a family matter.”

She gives my chest a gentle shove. I nearly fall down as the impact hits me. No blood is drawn because her nails don't scratch my skin. Her palm is flat, not balled into a fist as the brunt of her flesh hits me soft in the chest. Her words are a slap in the face, harsher than any blow Domitia ever doled out.

I have let this woman touch the darkest parts of me. I have let her reach inside of me. I have lain down all of my defenses at her feet. And she is turning her back on me and reaching out for another.

Marechal goes back down on her knees. She hovers over her brother, giving him all of her care. Brushing Arneis's hair from his forehead, she coos soothing words to him.

Me, she's forgotten. Put aside, because I am not her family. I am not first on her list.

My jaw won't work to form words, so I turn. I grab my pants on the way out, not bothering with shoes or a shirt. I need a drink, a sweet drink from a willing victim. I need to tie someone down and flog her until she is dripping, begging. Needing me. Wanting only me. Knowing that only I can provide the release she needs.

And when I'm done with her, I'll leave her to someone else for aftercare. I'll crawl under my bed and sleep alone. Shut myself inside my crypt where I am safe, and no one can touch me.

I step out into the night. If I want to get to Club Toxic, I'll need to move fast. The sun is only a few hours away, which doesn't leave much time to play.

I turn to do just that but don't get far. The air leaves my lungs. Something has come down hard on my head. I lose my footing and go down to my knees. Then I feel a second strike, and all goes black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

*M*arechal

THE QUIET SNICK of the door reverberates in my ears. Every part of me wants to chase after Gaius. To grab hold of his hands, which had balled into two tight fists. To brush my lips against his mouth, which had compressed into a thin line. To wrap my arms around his body, which had stiffened and closed off.

All the walls we'd torn down between us moments ago were just bricked over in the blink of an eye. My dismissal hurt him. But Gaius's hurt feelings can wait until the morning. Right now, my brother is in crisis.

"There's something wrong about all of this," Arneis says.

His knees are pulled into his chest. His arms are wrapped tightly around them. He rocks his torso in the way he only ever did as a child, soon after our mother passed.

"I'm missing something, Mare."

Like me, Arneis has always been a rock. He looks at a problem, ingests the facts, and spits out a logical solution. With his analytical, straightforward thinking, he's never

been perceptive enough to see the curveballs coming his way.

"We have to find Cari," he adds.

I pull the cover tighter around me as I sit next to my brother. "Cari is fine, Arnei. I talked to her earlier today. She's with Hadrian."

Arneis shakes his head, violently, as though there are bees buzzing around in his head. My hand was on his shoulder. I snatch it out of the way as his body trembles.

"She's not safe. He's going to bite her."

"Arneis, you're not making sense."

"I'm trying," he shouts. "I'm trying to remember."

My brother's eyes are haunted as he looks up at me. His hands go to his head. He rubs at his temples as though trying to loosen the knot that has a hold on him.

"They're after me." His voice is a whisper. His eyes are wide, irises darting back and forth between the corners of his eyes. "I think they have her."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Lucius Frangelico."

That's the name of the man who was trying to buy the vineyard before the Serranos stepped in. I don't know much about Frangelico, except that he is probably richer than god and owns an exclusive club downtown.

"You don't know what they get up to in that club. They get deliveries from a bloodmobile. The Serranos go there. I saw them."

That catches my attention. Arneis is not a club-goer. As a kid, he preferred dress pants to jeans, and a tie to any sport's jersey.

"Arneis, you're not making any sense. The doctor's said you suffered a concussion from the accident—"

"It wasn't a concussion. It was the white-haired woman." His gaze is far away, but it's not hazy. He looks clear-eyed, like he's watching a scene play out in his mind. "She had sharp teeth. She bit me. She took Cari."

My throat is too raw to speak. My eyes sting with unshed tears. I'm used to taking care of my sick siblings. But no chicken noodle soup, or aspirin, or kissing of boobos, is going to fix this.

Arneis rubs at his neck. There are two raised bumps there, right over the jugular. But those could easily be bug bites.

"When I came to, Hadrian was pressing his wrist to my mouth. He was feeding me his blood."

"Arneis, that's enough." I tug at his arm to pull him up. But he won't budge.

"And then Gaius stared into my eyes. He told me to forget, and I did."

Arneis's gaze focuses on me. His dark eyes are clear, as clear as when he's doing a math problem in his head and arrives at the answer without the aid of a calculator.

"He was trying to do it again just now. I could feel him in my mind, Marechal."

His voice is desperate now. He grips my shoulders with both his hands. His hold on me is painful, but nowhere near as bad as the pain I feel as I watch my little brother lose his mind.

"It wasn't an accident," says Arneis. "I went to get Cari. We were driving. And then this woman came out of nowhere. She had fangs. She bit me. Then she took Cari."

"Cari is fine," I say as calmly as I can. "I'll call her so you can talk to her yourself."

But after I dial her number, the phone just rings and rings. I pull up Hadrian's number and get the same result. They're newlyweds and it's the middle of the night. What should I expect? But I need Arneis to see that there is no truth to what he's made up in his mind.

White-haired women falling from the sky and biting him. Hadrian feeding him blood. Gaius wiping his mind. It's all a result of his head injury. I'd rather convince my brother

myself than have him see a doctor, as that would certainly ruin his career as a public servant.

The next number I dial is Gaius's. It hasn't been long enough for him to get from my place to his. Maybe he can turn around and come back.

I shouldn't have sent him away in the first place. This isn't a problem I know how to handle. And I don't want to handle it on my own.

Gaius's phone rings in the ear I have pressed to the phone. Then it rings again, loud and clear in my other ear. I pull my phone away and the ringing continues. I spy Gaius's phone on the floor where he left his ruined shirt.

I bend down to pick up the phone. There are two alerts on the screen. One is a missed call from me. The other is a text from Hadrian.

Cari and I are playing in the cellar. Don't come knocking.

The cellar? The one with the sex toys hanging on the wall and spanking apparatus in the center? The one sitting out back of the Serrano main house?

"Arneis, get up. We're going to pay a visit to our new in-laws."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Gaius

CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, vampires do get headaches. There's nothing wrong with our nerve endings. All of our senses are simply enhanced. We can feel the same pain as humans, especially if doled out by a weapon of mass destruction, or another supernatural creature.

There are claw marks next to the bump at the base of my skull. They're both healing rapidly, but sting as my body regenerates the torn flesh. I'm healing a little slower than usual since I skipped yesterday's meal and barely ate the day before that. So the throb at the base of my skull feels like a freight train is ramming into it, shifting into reverse, backing up, and ramming it again.

Were I not so thirsty, it wouldn't be so bad. During my time with Domitia, this would've been considered foreplay. She would've made sure I was well fed, all so that she could make the pain last longer.

My only care is for Marechal. I can still smell her on me. But I don't smell her in here. The fact that she is safe eases

my worries. Which takes my mind back to the pain.

It takes a long moment for the blackness to recede. It takes my eyes a few seconds more before my surroundings become clear. Overhead, there is an open shaft that lets in the moonlight. But there isn't much to see.

I smell rich earth, but with an underlying mustiness of mold. The walls are cold. Hard. Rock.

I'm in a cave. One that's deep underground. If I inhale deeply enough, I can smell berries. Not the tart berries of the Durand vineyard. I smell the unmistakable sweet reds of the Serrano grapes.

I'm back on my land. But I'm not in my home. I'm somewhere deep underneath it, in the caves my brothers and I explored when we first came here. When we came here months ago, we caught no whiff of shifters. Now the place reeks of cat.

Just great. When the others learn I was taken down by a pack of felines, I will never hear the end of it.

A movement to the side instantly clears my head of any residual pain. It looks like the big kitties have come out to play. Eyes flash at me in the darkness of the cave.

There is an open alcove. Three males stand in the doorway. They are large, with black hair and brown skin. I don't see any of the female shifters from the vineyard, but I can smell them nearby.

The women had appeared docile in the vineyard. I should've known better. As a vampire, I am higher up on the food chain than their species, but they are natural predators. Their four-legged ancestors roamed these lands long before humans stood to walk on two feet.

"You know you are breaking the peace treaty," I say, aiming for diplomacy. "Lucius Frangelico has signed an accord with the shifters of this territory."

"We are not under Frangelico's thumb. Or that dog, Garrett Green."

I should've guessed that. The vineyard is just out of Frangelico's territory. And I should have known that wolf shifters and cat shifters wouldn't mix. But it was worth a try. "What do you want?"

"This land is ours," says the larger one. He wears his hair in two long braids that trail over his shoulders. His features are so fine that he might be mistaken for a girl if it weren't for his bare chest and bulging biceps.

"I have a deed that says otherwise."

"Words on paper mean nothing to us." Mr. Pippi Longstocking takes a step into the cave. "Our forefathers lived on this land long before your blood was poisoned by your maker."

I take my time coming to my feet, making certain not to make any sudden moves. There still might be a way to get out of this without bloodshed.

Shifters are strong. So are vampires. My ability to trace would even my odds despite the unfair number of males before me. But I don't know these caves, and I have a feeling they're hiding their numbers. I can smell more bodies outside the door. More testosterone that's eager for a fight.

"Sounds like something you fellas are going to have to take up with the government."

Longstocking snorts at that. The other two give me a hard stare. I can't blame them. The US government gave Native Americans a raw deal at every turn. The Spanish regents and church ordered the Inquisition. In all my centuries, I've never met a governing body that actually had what was best for the people in mind.

The government won't help in this matter. Neither will documents or deeds. This is a supernatural problem.

"You're the reason my grapes aren't growing," I say.

Longstocking shakes his head. "No, that's the prophecy."

This night just keeps getting better. The reason I like the wine business so much is because it doesn't deal with any

magical bullshit. It's science. Filled with predictable variables that I can control. Unlike foretelling and soothsaying.

I'd rather deal with the church. At least then I know any evildoing could always be linked back to the desires of wicked men out to grab power or money. Prophecies? Those are beyond this realm, and rarely bring anything good.

"What prophecy?"

He doesn't answer. He steps back. There is a loud, cranking groan as the door of the alcove is shut. Then a clank as a lock slams into place.

Great. I'm locked in an underground cave surrounded by a bunch of jaguar shifters. A perfect ending to a perfect night. Except the night isn't over, and it will be soon.

Up above, I can see the moon in the shaft of the cave's opening. The white orb is slowly sinking down the horizon. In just a couple of hours, it will descend. And the sun will rise.

"Uh oh, did the big bad vampire forget his sunshades?"

The voice comes from the other side of the cave. There is a woman sitting on a small mattress on the floor. She's dressed in a thin shift that leaves nothing to the imagination. She lies back with her arms crossed behind her head, her painted toes hanging off the bedding.

Exactly what kind of prophecy is going on here?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

*M*arechal

I PULL up to the Serrano vineyard less than ten minutes after leaving home. The drive should've taken over twenty, but my foot never left the gas.

I will always go full speed ahead with anything to do with my family, be they in need, or lying through their teeth.

I can't believe Cari lied to me. She's kept things from me before. But never a bold-faced, *I'm out of the country on my honeymoon, not hiding out in my husband's sex cellar* lie.

When I get hold of my little sister, I'll... what? Berate her for wanting to have a little private fun with her new husband?

No, I won't do that. I'm not angry anymore. I'm filled with worry and uncertainty. Cari likely has her reasons for keeping me in the dark about her whereabouts. But I can't grasp what's going on with my brother.

In the passenger seat, Arneis is white-knuckling the seat belt. I should have thought about his nerves. He's just survived an accident. And our father died in one last year.

But I can't think of everyone else right now. I need him to see Cari for himself. To see that she is healthy and whole and without fangs.

Vampires? Where could he have gotten such an idea? Arneis was never one for fantasy novels. I can't remember him reading fiction outside of schoolwork. He prefers historical biographies, social treatises, and political speeches throughout the ages with annotated commentary. Vampires are not in his wheelhouse.

I can't have this getting out. If he begins spouting stories about vampires out in polite society, he will be booted out of public office at sunrise. But Arneis is a logical man. Once I show him Cari, once he sits down and talks with Hadrian and Gaius, everything will click back into place in his head. He'll see the error of his muddled thoughts. He has to. The alternative would be to turn to doctors, and that would likely get leaked to the media.

All is quiet when we pull through the gates of the Serrano vineyard. I see Gaius's car in the driveway. Good, he's here. I grab his phone. His shirt is still back at my place, now tucked in my top dresser drawer. It's not likely he'll wear it again, but I have designs on making it my new nightie. Though I would prefer to sleep in his arms.

I eye the wine cellar off to the side of the house. If my sister is in there, she is likely naked and in the throes of passion. Not necessarily something I want to see. Definitely not something that will help her older brother's psyche. So, I turn to the house.

I raise my fist to knock. A niggling at the nape of my neck urges me to try the knob. Unballing my fist, I wrap my fingers around the cool metal, and it gives.

I expect the hinges to creak. They don't. The door whispers open, allowing us entry.

"Wait." Arneis grabs my forearm. "Don't we have to be invited inside?"

“That’s a rule for vampires; they have to be invited into a human’s home. We’re not—” I clamp my mouth shut and pinch the bridge of my nose. I’m so tired that I nearly bought into this nonsense. After letting out a gush of a sigh, I proceed inside.

“Gaius?” I call into the dark hall.

Feeling along the wall, I don’t find any switches for light fixtures. I can navigate my own home in the dark, having lived there all my life. But I am instantly lost in this maze of halls and rooms that not even the moonlight penetrates.

I take another step forward and bump into a hard wall. The wall reaches out and grabs my arm. I scream.

Light floods the room, and the wall of flesh comes into view. Virius has a hand under my armpit. He’s holding me up. In front of me are a set of stairs that lead outside. One more step, and I would’ve fallen down them and broken my neck.

From behind me, Arneis lets loose a battle cry. He charges Virius. Arneis is a big man, but Virius is broad. My brother collides into the wall that is Virius and falls back on his ass. His head thuds against the floor, likely causing another concussion.

I jerk free of Virius’s hold to join my brother on the floor. Arneis groans as he rubs his head.

Virius gazes down at the two of us, his head cocked to the side as he studies us. “Gaius isn’t here. I thought he was with you.”

“He left my place nearly an hour ago,” I say as I help Arneis to sit up. “His car is out front.”

“He didn’t drive to your place. He walked there.”

My gaze swings from my brother up to Virius. “He walked? I live over ten miles away.”

Virius shrugs. I note the man is wearing cowboy chaps and a t-shirt with a Native American in a headdress on it. The mismatch of cultural appropriation gives me pause... until I see what he has in his hand.

"I told you." Arneis raises a shaky finger, pointing at the object in Virius's hand. "Vampires."

Virius looks down, then he curses. "Great, now Cari will be pissed at me. She didn't want you two to know."

I stare, stunned, as Virius lifts the bag of blood to his mouth. His sharp teeth gleam in the moonlight. He punctures a hole at the top of the bag and then takes a pull like he's a kid sipping from a Capri Sun juice pouch.

I can't decide if I should scream out of fear, or gag out of disgust. My mind is so scrambled that I can't make a move. I can only stare as Virius drains the bag dry and then swipes the back of his hand over his mouth.

"You'll have to wait for Gaius to get home, or for Hadrian to come out of the dungeon with Cari. I'm shite at mind wiping. I might take everything, and then Cari will be really pissed. Luckily, she's not the type to bind my balls. At least, she hasn't tried yet."

That's all I need to hear. I don't know exactly what it is that I just saw. What I do know is that I need to get my brother up and away from this man. Then I need to find my sister, and get her out of this nuthouse.

I manage to get Arneis to his feet. Virius doesn't make a move towards us. He simply watches as we snake around him to the stairs that lead outside. Once the cool night air hits my face, I tell Arneis to run. But my foot hits the ground wrong and I go down.

I reach out to brace my fall. I'm able to protect my face, but my hands bear the brunt. The sharp edge of a rock slices into the flesh of my palm. The pain shoots through me and my knee goes down, catching another rock.

I roll over to find Virius looking down at me. The man's nose twitches as he looks at the blood. His white fangs flash in the dark night.

"Don't worry; I already ate." Virius holds up the empty pouch as evidence, but something else moves in the night.

I hear the crash of a door being swung open, then a high-pitched scream, followed by a low growl. From the cellar at the back of the house, I catch a blur of hair and limbs.

Cari.

The pain in my hands and knee are forgotten as my sister comes into view. I lift my arms, wanting to reach out her, to hold her in my arms. But there's something chasing her; something big and fast.

It's nearly on her. It grabs hold of her ankle, and they both go down. As they roll on the ground, I see Cari's pursuer is Hadrian.

They roll in the grass. Not with the passion of lovers, but with the aggression of two individuals at odds.

Cari slips free of Hadrian's hold and she is up, running towards me again. Her lips pull back from her teeth, revealing sharp white fangs.

"Cari, no."

My sister's fangs flash at me. There is no recognition in her eyes. Her gaze is fixed on the blood dripping from my outstretched hand.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Gaius

THE WOMAN STEPS into the moonlight. By all accounts, she is breathtaking, with striking features. Her skin is a few shades darker than Marechal's. Her hair is a curtain of ebony. Her eyes are hazel, not the dark plum of a Sémillion grape. They flash at me, revealing her shifter nature.

A few days ago, I would've been curious to know what color her nipples were, what shade of red her cunt was, how long she would last at the edge of my cat o'nine tail whip.

I'm not interested in the answer to any of those queries. All I can think about is how to get out of the hell I am in. My gaze turns skyward.

"You're not going to make that climb," she says, coming to stand next to me.

She's small. But the way she holds herself makes me feel as though she's looking down her nose at me. I get the sense that she is a leader. So why is she the one trapped in here with me?

"My name is Gaius Serrano."

"I know who you are."

"Might I know the pleasure of your name?"

"Ixazaluoh."

She cocks her head to the side. It's a clear challenge. Even with my slick tongue, I can't repeat that grouping of consonants and vowels.

"Thought so," she scoffs. "You may call me Zahara."

"Zahara, you want to tell me what I'm doing here? What is this prophecy?"

"It has nothing to do with you. Those idiots brought the wrong man." She rubs her hands over her forehead. The lines there don't smooth under her touch; they remain creased, as if she carries the weight of the world there.

"Fine," I say. "Let's just tell them that and then they can let me go."

Zahara drops her hand and she cocks her head to the other side. The chit looks like she only just entered her twenties. I have centuries on her, but I'm left feeling as though my suggestion is foolish.

"That's not the plan," she says.

"Want to clue me in on what the plan is? I may be able to help."

Again, she scoffs, the lines on her face making deeper grooves. "Why would I send a man to do a woman's job? What I need from you is to get on the bed."

I look at the dusty mattress on the ground, then back at her. Is she expecting me to fuck her? It would make sense. Talk of a prophecy. Cursed lands. She is likely the virginal sacrifice. Too bad my dick had no desire to get it up for anyone but Marechal.

"I'm not going to sleep with you."

Zahara snorts as she looks me up and down, obviously finding me wanting. "That's rich, coming from you. Your reputation has reached even as far as Central America, Lord of the Lash."

I wince at the use of the moniker. When I open my mouth, Zahara holds up her hand to indicate she's not done talking.

"Marechal Durand is one of the good ones. She deserves better than a player like you."

"She not good; she's the best. I'm a better man because of her. I want to be everything that woman needs. So help me get back to her."

Zahara studies me again. I'm not certain if this perusal has earned me a reassessment.

"The only way back to your girlfriend is through me." She waves her hands over her barely covered private area. "However, I have no intention of being some exotic sacrifice to a white man. This isn't Disney's Pocahontas."

"I'm not white. I'm from Gaul."

She frowns as though that historical detail matters. "We're going to pretend we're doing the deed."

"You mean have sex?"

The grooves dig further into her forehead as she sighs. "Please let there be some brain cells in that pretty little head of yours. We..." she points between the two of us, "are not getting horizontal. You're not the right one. If we have sex, it won't break the curse."

There is a part of me that wants to understand the curse and the prophecy that will break it. This business has been my life for centuries, I don't want it to fail. But a larger part of me needs to be free of this place and get back to Marechal. She is all that I can see of my future. If I follow along with Zahara's plan, she could get me closer to the bigger goal. Then, once we're free, I can find out more about the mystical mayhem going on.

"We're going to act like it," she's saying. "We're going to make sex noises, rumple the sheets, make it believable. You know; a little oohhh and ahhh."

"Have you ever even had sex?" I ask. Her cries are the most unenthusiastic I've ever heard. Whatever her future, it

won't be in the porn industry.

My critique sobers her up. Her eyes flash at me. The cat in her is ready to come out, claws blazing.

"My hymen is my business. A woman's virginity is not a prize. Maybe I fucked all of Central America. Maybe I'm saving it for a special man. But that man is not you. So get your mind out of my panties."

"You're the one who's miming fake sex and lame orgasms. I give mind-blowing sex and screaming orgasms, if you want to know." It's a point of professional pride. Even though I'm turning in my membership card at Club Toxic, I still have a reputation to protect.

"I don't want to know," Zahara hisses. "I don't need to know. We just need to make those males out there believe."

"And then they'll let us out?"

Zahara bites her lip, not meeting my gaze. "They'll let me out. You, they'll try to kill."

"Right. I'm not exactly on board with your plan."

"That's why we'll need to act fast." She pulls a dagger from under the mattress. "My sisters will be at the ready once I give the signal."

"You would kill your own people?"

"The men out there are not my people. All they want is this land. And they're going to try and use my womb to get it."

"Your womb?" So this prophecy is a step beyond virginal sacrifice. It requires the birth of a child as well. "You know vampires can't have children?"

"Shows how much you know."

Zahara steps onto the bed and begins to jump up and down while making grunting and groaning noises. I stare, aghast. It's the worse porno I've ever witnessed in my life. And I am its costar.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

*M*arechal

WHEN CARI WAS TEETHING, she was a nightmare. She would wail, her little mouth open wide as those first teeth broke her swollen gums and pushed through. Once the first couple were through, her toothy smile could brighten anyone's day.

Those teeth are flashing at me now. Fear should stab my heart. Horror should pierce my consciousness. My beautiful, bright baby sister has become a monster. The little girl I've cared for all her life looms over me, preparing to take my life from me.

Behind me, Arneis bellows. It is a gut-wrenching demand for Cari to stop. An agonizing cry for her to come to recognize her sister, her family.

My senses sharpen as my life flashes before my eyes. The smell of dying berries is the first thing that penetrates my consciousness. I see Arnei and Cari barefoot as they stomp grapes in a barrel, while I tinker with the valve that collects the juices. I hear Arneis reciting a speech for a student election while Cari watches cartoons. Sound is all around

me but my gaze is focused in the lens of my microscope. In another memory, I'm at dinner with my brother and sister, but my thoughts are on my wine glass which holds a competitor's blend. I can't remember a single word of what my siblings said that night, but I can remember the notes of the wine.

I have always been there for my siblings. What I haven't been is present, in the moment, tuned in to them. Because I didn't know how. It was Gaius who taught me that. He just had to tie me down to do it.

Cari has slipped Hadrian's grasp. She's dodged around Virius, faster than my human eyes could perceive. And now she's on me.

My back impacts the ground hard. I wince. I open my eyes to see my sister above me.

Her eyes are glowing with an otherworldly light. Her teeth gleam in the moon's glow. I think back to that baby and her first teeth. She'd bitten me then. I'd scowled at her. But then she'd laughed, and I'd forgiven her.

This time, I don't think I'll survive my sister's bite. She's a vampire. I don't understand how this can be. But it is.

She is a creature of the night. So is her husband, whose eyes are also shining bright. So is Virius, with a dribble of pouch blood on his chin. So must be Gaius.

I should feel powerless at this moment. I don't. All I feel is the need to protect my family, like always. To make sure they have everything that they might need in this world. And if that need is my blood, then so be it.

I reach my bloody hand up to Cari's face. Her nose twitches as I run my fingertips over her cheek. Her lips quiver as I cup her chin in my palm.

She leans into my hand and closes her eyes. Her nostrils flare as the blood trickles down the fleshy part of my palm. Cari's fangs protrude further from her gums.

She doesn't cry as she did as a teething baby. She doesn't smile, either, but I can't help noticing that she is

just as beautiful and bright now as when she was a tiny thing in my arms. And then she is flying off me.

Hadrian has her in his arms. He turns her so that she is caught against his chest. He steps back from me, but I can hear Cari crying.

That's what guts me. Not the knowledge that my vampire sister was about to rip out my throat. The sound of her torment that she'd nearly done it.

"I almost did it," Cari whimpers.

"But you didn't," Hadrian soothes. "You are so strong. My strong girl."

Hadrian strokes her hair, petting her as though she were a pet. His hold on her is absolute, like she is a precious gem that he will never be parted from.

I sit up, the world spinning a bit as I do. I look for my brother, who is trying to break out from behind the wall of Virius's outstretched arms. I look back to my sister, whose shoulders shake with tearful misery.

"Cari?"

She doesn't raise her head. She won't look at me.

"Cari, I'm okay. You didn't hurt me."

I place my feet underneath me but am still a bit wobbly from my multiple falls. Virius comes to me. He rips his shirt up and bandages my hand.

"Look, Cari." I hold up my covered hand. "It's all gone. I'm fine."

Her shoulders stop shaking. She tucks her chin to her chest. She doesn't look directly at me. I can only see her profile.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I ask.

"Tell you what?" She sniffles. "That I died and came back a vampire? I figured you'd get pissed."

"I am pissed." I turn my gaze to Hadrian. "You didn't even ask me for her hand, yet you saw fit to take her life."

At least the man—scratch that. At least the vampire has the good sense to look cowed. I may have just had the near-

death epiphany that I needed to to be more present for my family. But that doesn't mean I'll back down in the bossiness level.

"Hadrian, you and I are going to have a talk about that," I say.

Cari lifts her head then. She gives Hadrian the smirk she used to give Arneis when they were in trouble and knew a punishment from their big sister was coming.

"You're taking this all very well, Mare," says Cari.

No. I am in shock—likely with a heavy helping of denial. Vampires are real. What next? Will the Easter Bunny rise up on its haunches and walk over with a basket of bunny eggs?

"We're going to all have a sit down and talk about this over breakfast," I say.

"Um, Mare," says Cari, fully facing me now as she wipes the tears away. "We don't do sun. Allergy."

Right. Looks like my family as well as the vineyard will be switching to a nocturnal schedule. My family has now doubled in size. And the males now outnumber the females. That will be different.

"So, bedtime soon for you three," I say, looking at the moon as it dips lower in the sky. "Where is Gaius?"

"He's not with you?" asks Hadrian.

"He left when Arneis came. That was over an hour ago. I assumed he was coming home."

"He's here." Virius's nose is lifted to the sky, like a bloodhound catching a scent.

"He's not in the house," says Cari, her gaze scanning the darkened house as though she can see all.

"Viri is right," says Hadrian. "He's here. On the property. But his scent... it's far away."

Cari lifts her nose to the sky along with Hadrian and Virius. And then, in unison, all three of their gazes drop to the ground.

"Do you smell that?" asks Virius, his eyes glowing bright.

"I do," says Cari. "Whoever she is, she smells delicious."

"Whoever she is she has Gaius," says Hadrian.

A growl sounds in the night. It comes from Virius.
"Whoever she is, she's mine."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

*G*aius

“AHHH... ohhh... Oh my gods, Gaius, I never knew it could be like this.”

I lean against the opposite side of the doorway as I watch Zahara bounce on the bed. She looks like a kid staying up late at a sleepover. Nothing like the porn star getting her back blown out that she’s pretending to be.

“Don’t stop.” She bangs her hands against the rock face wall. “Don’t stop. Ahhh.”

I moan at the performance. It does not do my abilities any justice. Just as I’m about to launch a formal protest, I hear movement from outside.

Zahara’s eyes flash bright. She moves off the mattress. Her bare feet are quiet as she prowls across the room.

Though her feet are quiet, her mouth is not. She continues to make the cooing sex sounds. To me, she sounds like a cat in heat. An apt description, considering her animal nature.

She motions to me with her hand as she comes to one side of the door. I move into place at the other. But Zahara is still motioning. She points at her mouth, still making the mewling sounds, and then at my mouth. I groan but acquiesce.

"There you go, baby. Take my long cock all the way into that sweet pussy of yours as I fill it with my seed."

Zahara chokes on her mewls. Then she gags. Her face contorts into absolute horror and disgust.

What did she expect? I'm not an actor. My performance is based on real-life events. And it looks like my rendition has produced results.

The door begins to move. The fake sex reaches a climax as we both hold our breath. Up overhead, the moon is no longer sending light down the shaft. Sunrise is likely only an hour away. Or less.

A sliver of torchlight illuminates the cave. The crack opens wider. A hand reaches in. I grab it. I pull the man inside and crash his body against the wall.

"Zahara," shouts the male, "take him."

But Zahara doesn't take me; she takes the man. The male shifter has half a foot on her, but she still manages to wrap her claws around the back of his neck and pull his back flush to her chest. Her dagger is at his throat as she frogmarches him out of the room.

"Move," she commands.

I see five other males just outside the door. All of their gazes are menacing. All of their sharp claws are ready to tear flesh.

I am equal parts lover and fighter. Five women, I could please with some effort. Five males would be hard to kill on my own. Not to mention having to look out for a small female shifter with a sassy mouth and only a dagger.

"I never would've guessed it," says the captive leader. "You were always so frigid, but you get a little dick in you and it turns your pretty head."

"Of course you would think this was his idea," Zahara says, jerking her head back to me.

It galls me to stand behind a woman when violence is afoot, but unlike the male shifters, I can see that this pretty little head has thought all of this through.

"You let a colonizer in between your thighs and you forget your people, your mission."

I want to argue that I was born before the French sailed to the Americas. But that argument isn't paramount now. The sun's rays are waking, and I have to get on the other side of these men to get out of here.

"Oh, I haven't forgotten my mission, Hok'ee," says Zahara.

"Then take this dagger off my neck and point it at the leech."

The males surrounding us dig in their heels. None of them ball their fists. All splay their claws, ready for attack. But in their ready focus on the scene before them, they aren't looking behind them.

"This land belonged to our ancestors," Hok'ee goes on. "The white man stole it. But with your royal blood and this demon's seed, you will birth the Midnight Son and the land will become fruitful again. The prophecy says so. We can be rich."

"That's your problem, Hok'ee," said Zahara. "This has never been about the land for us."

"Us?"

Behind the men, dozens of cat eyes flash in the darkness. The women pounce on the males. Some turn fully into their animal forms of tawny yellow and black spots, or reddish-brown and black spots. The women outnumber the males, and the fight is over before it really began.

Zahara steps around Hok'ee, who was left unmarred, just a tiny prick at his neck from her dagger. Hok'ee drops to his knees, along with his other men.

“You really thought I was going to let you use my body for your gains?” Zahara scoffs as she cleans her dagger on the white shift she’s wearing. “Misogyny is the colonialism of the twenty-first century.”

If my heart wasn’t already taken, I’d have a boner for her. There is nothing like the smell of a strong woman. My nose twitches as I catch the scent of another strong woman coming into the cave.

Marechal. She is here. But how?

Then I smell my brothers alongside Marechal’s sweet scent. My entire world appears at the mouth of that cave. My brothers, my new siblings, and the love of my life.

But a pack of jaguar shifters stands between us, their claws unsheathed and ready to fight.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

*M*arechal

So, vampires aren't going to be the only shock to my system tonight. There are big cats transforming into women before my eyes. It takes the meaning of being a cat lady to a whole new level. But I'm prepared to step through them because Gaius is on the other side.

As I take a step, I hear a low hiss coming from both animals and females. Upon closer inspection, these are not simply big pussycats that would sit in a ray of sunlight from the window. These are jaguars, with sharp claws and pointy teeth.

"Lay a claw on her, and all bets are off."

I would never have suspected that such menace could come from Gaius Serrano's silky tone. From across the room, his eyes flash pure threat and destruction.

"I'll stay if you let them go."

His gaze is on me but he's talking to a woman standing at his side. I peer into the dimly lit room and make out Zahara. She isn't looking at Gaius. Her gaze is dead set on me.

"I already told you," she says, "you're not the one I want."

Zahara takes a step forward. The pack of women and big cats part to let her pass. Beside me, I feel movement. Virius, who had been standing in front of me like a shield, steps forward as well. His movements are stilted, as though he's being pulled to Zahara by some unseen force.

"We have no quarrel with the Durands." Zahara stops when she is an arm's length from Virius. "I want that one."

"You can't have him," say Hadrian and Gaius in unison.

"I'm not leaving here," says Virius.

The man stands toe to toe with Zahara. His height and bulk dwarf her, but to my eyes, they look on par with each other. I have known Zahara for years, but she doesn't look like the girl I knew. She looks like a force of nature. Now that I see the strength in her direct gaze, I can't remember that meek girl who bent over my vines. I wonder if she ever even existed.

Gaius comes up to the pair. Neither appears to notice him. Zahara is sizing Virius up as though he's the perfect specimen of grape that she's preparing to shear from the vine. Virius gazes at Zahara as though she is the sunlight reflecting off the dew of a budding vine.

"Viri—" Gaius tries, but his brother shakes his head.

"You and Hadrian tried to save me, tried to give me purpose," says Virius. "I'm a broken monster, but there is one thing I know how to do."

Virius turns from Zahara then. It looks like it pains him to do so. He turns to face Gaius. Hadrian comes up to the other side of him.

"Look at her," Virius says to his brothers. "She's so tiny and wee. She needs me to protect her."

Zahara scoffs at that. There's a dagger in her hand and blood on her white dress. Exactly what has happened in here?

"Earlier, before he saw her, he called her his," says Hadrian.

"He's wrong," says Zahara. "He's mine. My captive, a sacrifice to appease the gods."

"A sacrifice?" says Viri. "Wouldn't be my first time. Do you have an altar? Cuffs? Rope? Anything but a stake, I'm okay with."

Zahara blinks rapidly as she stares at Virius. For the first time, her veneer of certainty cracks, and her gaze lowers.

"Don't worry, brother," says Virius. "This isn't a nightmare. I have a feeling I will sleep well from this day forward."

Hadrian and Gaius exchange another look. But in the end, they each give Virius a hug before leaving him with the women.

Gaius scoops me up into his arms and squeezes. Then I am flying through the air. When I open my eyes again, we are out of the cave. The moon is quickly sinking beneath the horizon.

"We have to get inside," says Hadrian.

Gaius bites his lip. His fang is sharp as it captures the flesh. I run my finger over the point, and he gasps.

"You know?" he says.

"I know," I say. "And when you wake up tonight, we're going to have a talk about what you did to my brother. We talk out our issues in this family, not make each other forget."

The laugh startles out of him.

"Somebody's in trouble," Cari singsongs.

"Oh, you are on my shortlist, too, missy. You lied to me."

Cari purses her lips. Then she spreads them into a wide grin, fangs and all. "Love you, Mare."

"I love you, too, *mon chou*."

I pull my sister into a firm embrace. From the corner of my eye, I spot Arneis. His scowl swings between Hadrian and Gaius.

“So, are you going to wipe our minds again?” he asks.
“Make Marechal and me forget what we just saw?”

“No,” says Gaius. “You’re both a part of this family now. We protect our own.”

Arneis chews on that. But the corners of his mouth remain pinched, as though the taste is bitter. I am not looking forward to the next holiday dinner. The arguments around the table will be next level.

Still, my heart is happy. I have my family back. I have my business back. And, for the first time, I’ve made space for love in my life.

Gaius wraps me in his arms and carries me inside. The sun is at his heels as he closes his bedroom door.

“Sleep with me,” he says.

“For the whole day?” I’ve never slept the day away. It sounds irresponsible. It sounds like a plan. But that’s not what Gaius has in mind.

“Not for the whole day. For your whole life.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Gaius

HER HAND SLAPS MY CHEST. Her nails dig into my skin. My heart stops beating as my life flashes before my eyes.

I am afraid. Not of any pain. I am afraid of any emptiness that will result if Marechal refuses me.

"What are you saying, Gaius?" Marechal asks as her hand continues to press into me. "Are you asking me to marry you?"

Am I? I'm not certain. That doesn't sound like it would be long enough to get my fill of this woman.

"Marriage lasts a lifetime," I say. "I can offer you more than that."

Marechal's throat works as she gazes into my eyes. I could compel her, but her will is too strong. And the taste of her submission is far too tempting for me to give up.

"You want to make me like you? A vampire?"

"It's a dangerous process; too dangerous. You could die."

"What is the success ratio?" Marechal purses her lips. Her pupils dart as they calculate.

My fangs water as her mind whirs. "You're so fucking sexy when you talk maths."

A shy grin spreads across her face. My dick is hard for her. But it's my heart that is aching with need.

"We'll look at the statistics another time," I say. "For now, I just want your heart."

She places her hand on my chest. There is a scrap of fabric there. It smells of Virius. I spare a worry for my brother as I yank it away. When I see the blood there, my fangs protrude out of my mouth.

"Are you hungry?" she asks.

I try to swallow, but my teeth feel too big for my mouth. I don't want to scare her. But who am I kidding? This woman didn't flinch in a room full of jaguars. My unflappable boss bitch. Life with her is going to be a ride.

"Here." She tugs at the strap of her sundress, baring her shoulder. Then she pushes her dark hair aside, baring her neck.

Now my dick aches as much as my fangs. The adrenaline in my veins is burning. Yet, she is calm. That will not do. I want my first taste of her to be the perfect temperature of passion, pleasure, and bliss. And so I rip the garment from her body.

She is laid out bare before me. Her dark nipples are taut. Her cunny is already dripping with want. Already, she's sweet. But I want more.

I part her thighs. Using my shoulders, I force her legs wide. My mouth waters as I gaze at those perfectly plump lips.

Marechal jackknives off the bed as my fang scrapes the soft skin where her leg meets her secret flesh. It's just a nip, an appetizer before I start my main course. I have little patience tonight, no finesse left.

I latch onto her pussy and begin to lave. Her body is so primed for me, so obedient to my dominance, that the first

orgasm I pull from her is a simple affair. But it's enough to sweeten her blood. And I am thirsty.

Before she comes down, I bare my fangs. I lift my head to let her see the monster whose soul she's saved tonight. The man whose heart she now owns.

She doesn't scream. She doesn't flinch. She lets her head fall back in a move of submission.

The move nearly chokes the life out of me. I've made this strong woman surrender to me. I am humbled as her will bends. I am chastened as her back arches. But I am also hungry.

I sink my fangs into the femoral artery in her thigh. Marechal gasps, a long, low moan. Her body quakes as a second orgasm wracks her body. I plug her with my fingers so that she has something to cling to.

I pull deeply on her vessel, drinking heavily of her sweet, rich blood. Our hearts sync to the same beat. I have a feeling it will be that way for the rest of time.

The taste of her blood brings me to a climax of my own. My dick weeps in my pants as I drink her down. That has never happened to me before, and I can't wait to do it again.

But I can already feel the sun pulling me to sleep. Any more pleasure will have to wait until a new night. The room is secure, with blackout curtains to keep us safe.

I wrap Marechal in my arms, shielding her from any care, taking away any worry. But she wraps her arms tightly around me too, letting me know that I will never again have to shoulder a burden alone.

"Yes," she whispers, sleep tugging away at her consciousness.

"Yes, what *mon couer*?"

"That's my answer to your question. Yes, to all of it."

HIS VAMPIRE PRINCESS

CHAPTER ONE

Arneis

"THE REPORTS ARE IN COUNCILMAN DURAND," says my policy advisor. "They're not good."

I clench my fists as I sit back at my desk. The piece of furniture is small and made of cheap wood. There are a series of chips around the edges that have caused snags on my expensive suits one too many times. Grooves of graphite can be found in the drawers from my predecessors who wanted to leave their mark on this city and its community. I tighten my hold around the pen in my hand wondering if I should do the same. Because it might not be my desk for much longer.

"You've slipped in the polls."

Polling for local elections was laughable. Less than twenty percent of any given city, town, or municipality came out to vote for the seats of mayors, council members, or board members. Though I served a diverse constituency of coeds and soccer moms, Indigenous peoples and rednecks, scholars, and prostitutes, very few of them knew my name or what I'd done for them.

I had funneled more money over into the education budget that allowed each child in Tucson to have a computer in the classroom. I had filled every reported pothole over the last two years. I'd lowered the residents' taxes and balanced the budget putting the city in the black.

The city hadn't seen this kind of economic boom in years, maybe even decades. But I was about to lose my place in this worn seat and crumbling desk all because of a photo. A reporter had captured a shot of me walking out of an underground sex club late one night a few weeks ago.

"We just need to highlight your good works, remind the people why they voted for you four years ago."

They'd voted for me because of my family name. The Durand Vineyard was a generations-old establishment in Arizona, and I was its prince. I'd lived all twenty-five years of my life on a straight-laced path, much like the rows of grapes on my family's land. I had been groomed to take over from my father and run the business alongside my two sisters. But on my first day of high school, I'd happened into the school library and stumbled upon a student government meeting.

Seeing Robert's Rules of Order at work had fascinated my mind. I was used to straight rows of vines, predictable harvest times, and the precise measurements of wine blends. I liked things old, orderly, and results-oriented. By the next year, I was the class Vice President. Every year that followed, I'd been elected President.

Before this scandal, I had been on the trajectory to become City Mayor. I had had my sights set on Congressman. Even though the story had only run on the second page of the local rag, my future was blurred. Likely less than ten percent of my constituency read the papers, but it was enough to potentially lose my seat. All because of a photograph that was taken out of context.

"Perhaps a new video ad where we show the people your clean-cut image to detract from--"

My gaze shoots up. The young man before me squirms. He was an intern not long ago. I'd elevated him to this position when I saw his hunger as a political animal.

He thinks he's dealing with a man's base needs. I don't have those. I'm not a saint, but I'm as close as any modern man could get to it.

Despite what that gossip rag had printed, I've never had group or public sex. I'd never taken my clothes off outside of a locked bedroom with the lights off. I'd only had sex with two women and not at the same time. Charlotte Pratt and I had waited three months before taking our relationship behind closed doors. With Amber Walt, who I'd thought would become Mrs. Councilman Durand, we'd waited six months into our committed relationship.

That photograph of me coming out of Club Toxic was not the whole picture. That salacious report of what I'd been doing inside was complete fiction. The problem was, the actual facts surrounding the story sounded more like science fiction and fantasy than the voters would believe.

"Where are you going, sir?"

"To clear my name of this nonsense," I say as I slide into my suit jacket and straighten my tie. Ever since my first election as class President, I'd worn a suit and tie every day, except for the weekends. Then I wore a collared shirt and pressed slacks to relax.

On the streets, the sun is starting to set. Masked goblins and witches roam from door to door. Superheroes' capes trail behind as children run up to open doors to receive their rewards. I'd forgotten it was Halloween. I probably should've dismissed my staff to go home early, but like me, they are all workaholics who lived for the job.

Once in my car, I pull out of the city. Concrete buildings give way to rolling green pastures. The fields of green are spotted with the colorful heads of grapes. It's harvest time and many workers are out tending to the crops that will

turn the older citizens celebrating this festive holiday drunk in just a matter of hours.

I drive past the turn that would take me to my family's vineyard. Memories flood my mind of my time there with my family. My older sister Marechal who was forever in the lab blending berries, but would always look up when I wanted to run a debate strategy past her. My baby sister Cari who loved to color in my homemade campaign signs, insisting her color scheme would be my winning strategy.

I see both their smiling faces looking at me with trust and love. But as I wind the road to my destination, my mind begins to fog. The curves of the lane bend. In my mind, things get dark and twisted and bloody.

Memory is a fickle thing. I remembered the night I'd gone into Club Toxic to seek out its owner Lucius Frangelico. The billionaire had been trying to purchase my family's vineyard out from under us. I'd walked into a night club on family business and I'd left a sex dungeon as a sexual deviant.

The funniest part is that, during my business meeting, everyone inside the club had been fully clothed. The young people had been rubbing up against one another in the act of sexual desire. But no ones' base needs were being totally satisfied on the dance floor. That all had been happening a floor below.

It wasn't widely known that there was any sexual activity going on in the club. I certainly hadn't known it the night I'd gone in. Nor when I'd come out. Which leads me to believe that Frangelico and his minions were behind my demise.

They'd taken my family's business. They'd taken both of my sisters. And now they are trying to take my career.

I park my car in front of the Serrano vineyard as the last rays of the sun set. I've been to this house a couple of times. One such instance, I had almost forgotten. Because the Serranos had taken my memories from me.

"Arneis? Is that you." My sister Cari's voice comes from the other side of the door. "I can smell you from all the way inside, isn't that crazy. But don't worry, I already ate tonight."

"Cari, that's not funny," says Marechal as she opens the great doors.

I stand on the other side of the threshold gaping down at my sisters. They look exactly the same, but I know they are different. Like me, they both sport bite marks on their necks.

About a month ago, my baby sister had gotten herself in a relationship with a dead man walking. That wasn't hyperbole. Hadrian Serrano was a vampire. And just a few days ago, my older sister Marechal had gotten in bed with Serrano's brother, Gaius. Both of the creatures had mind-wiped Cari and Mare into loving them. It was the only way my two brilliant sisters would fall for such fiends.

Cari flashes me a toothsome grin complete with fangs. Marechal, only a couple of years older than me, gives me the maternal smile I've seen all my life. She hasn't been turned. Yet.

"Come inside," Marechal beckons.

The two women move into the dark recesses of the house. I hesitate, even though I know how the lore works. Humans don't need an invitation to come in the realms of monsters. It's getting out that's the trick.

"I wish you had called first," says Marechal. "We're headed out. Gaius has a political meeting."

"Political?" I say as we move into a formal living room. Doric columns frame the lit fireplace. Colorful murals line the walls around the curtained windows.

"Not with humans," says Cari, her voice going the excited pitch when she was about to go on an adrenaline-inducing adventure. "A vampire delegation has come from Africa to meet with the guys at Club Toxic."

I clench my teeth at the use of the words delegation and vampire together. The word politics does not belong in the same sentence with such mindless monsters. But another thing catches my attention.

"You're not going to that club," I say. "Neither of you."

"You do know she's over twenty-one, Arneis," says Marechal, jerking her thumb at Cari. "And it's just a costume party. Venetian themed. It sounds like fun."

Marechal and fun don't usually come up in the same sentence either. My older sister had to be dragged from her lab up until a week ago. But our family name has been dragged enough thanks to Frangelico and the Serranos.

"You don't know what happens at Club Toxic," I say.

"Do you?" says Cari. Her large brown eyes are no longer that of a child's. The tilt of her eyebrow says that she could answer her own question. What has that devil Hadrian gotten my sister into?

Even though I know what she now is, I still have trouble reconciling the fact that my baby sister is a blood-sucking monster. My hand goes to the bite on my shoulder. My entire body flinches as I touch it.

Cari's gaze goes solemn as she witnesses what I'm doing. Guilt wracks her features. "They're not all like that, Arnie."

She's referring to the bloodsucker who attacked us both weeks ago. I'd only recently began to remember the white-haired demon; Domitia. Before that, I'd only seen her in my nightmares because the Serranos had taken the memories of her biting me and of her kidnapping Cari from me. But those two vampires didn't realize just how strong a mind like mine was.

I had remembered. I need to find a way to let everyone in the town, everyone in the world know what walked amongst us. I need to find a way to expose them -the Serranos, Frangelico- for what they were.

But how?

"Plans have changed, ladies." Gaius Serrano steps into the formal room. The man is dressed in a silk robe that likely cost more than the city budget I'd balanced. "Queen Malika moved our meeting to tomorrow. So we can go back to bed. Ah, Arneis. Would you like to come in for dinner."

Serrano's gaze spreads wide. The flash of his white teeth sends me back in time to that blinding pain when that crazed bitch sunk her teeth into my neck and ripped my skin. My hand goes back to cover my neck and I take a step back.

"You're not getting a bite out of me."

"Arneis," Marechal says. "Manners."

"It's fine, *minou*," says Gaius. "Do not fear, my brother. I only eat your sister now."

"Gaius," says Marechal. "Manners."

"I'm not your brother."

Gaius doesn't argue with me. My sisters look disappointed that I don't take the ancient Roman's olive branch. I've never gotten into bed with the corrupt, and I don't plan to now.

"I have some place I need to be," I say. "I'll call before I come over next time."

"Are you sure you can't stay, Arnie?" says Cari.

She looks so much like herself, but I can feel a new strength in her. It's unnatural.

"I'll call you later," I say. "There's something I have to do."

I hop in my car and turn out of the property. I know exactly what I have to do. There will be a gathering of vampires inside Club Toxic tonight. I'm going to get in and gather proof to expose them. But my evidence will be the light of truth and not a photo out of context.

If I can push the vampires out of the closet, then I can clear my name. My constituents will know I'm not the deviant with unnatural lusts that gossip rag made me out to be. They'll be able to see for themselves that there truly are

things that go bump in the night. I'll be raised back to my former glory in the eyes of the twenty-percent I need to get reelected. Hell, I might even be able to aim for higher office.

CHAPTER TWO

*S*anai

"It's much grayer than I expected," I say as I peer down out of the window of the luxury hotel in Tucson, Arizona. "And flat."

Slate towers scrape the azure horizon, reminding me of the step pyramids of Egypt. Instead of the vibrant natural hues like oranges and reds and browns, these buildings are varying shadows in the night. The only color is the mountain that sits off in the distance. Its carob peak is a backdrop to remind these humans that they are insignificant, temporary guests on this planet.

"What did you expect, Sanai? They still can't figure out how my aunts and uncles built the pyramids."

I chuckle as I turn to Fayola. Her tiny braids are coiled tightly around her head. Not a single strand has gone astray even as she wakes to this new night. Much unlike my hair that is wild and free. My thick tufts of hair radiate from my head like the rays of the sun; rays I haven't seen in almost two hundred years.

"I only hope the queen finishes her business quickly so we can get back to civilized society," Fay says as she glides away from the window.

The gold bangles which cover the lengths of her arms make a tinkling sound, like a fanfare of bells announcing royalty is present. The gold accents warm her toasty brown skin. Her eyes are kohl'd in the way of her ancient ancestors. Her simple white sheath molds to her svelte form. Her head is high, perched atop her long, ibis-like neck. The people here would call her a swan. She has the beauty and grace of the bird.

"Perhaps the Queen Mother will let us go on an excursion to Hollywood," I say.

Fay's regal features turn sour. "Why would we want to go there?"

I don't bother to respond. Fay doesn't like to travel anywhere outside of Orun, the hidden queendom in the heart of the Saharan desert. The seat of power of the vampire queen Malika.

Fay balked when I had a movie projector bought in at the turn of the twentieth century. She wouldn't go near the television box I set up fifty years ago. And she'd petitioned the queen from allowing the internet inside the palace. So, I had to hoof it out into the desert with a satellite to catch up on reality TV each week.

"You look at this trip as an adventure, Sanai. When what it truly is is business. We are here to do our duty to our Queen and the queendom."

I'm still gazing out the window, so Fay doesn't see my eye roll. She's old school, as in five hundred years old. This place, these people, their innovations are insignificant in her mind. It all was dust when she was reborn and it will be but dust again when she takes her last breath. If it's not gold or the Egyptian engineering of her pharaonic ancestors, Fayola pays it little mind.

"The Queen Mother is here for diplomatic relations with King Lucius," Fay continues.

"Really?" I turn from the awakening nightlife out the window with a grin. "Because I hear that there is a party going on at his club for the next two nights."

"That is not our way; mixing with males and humans."

By males, Fay means any males be they vampire or, worse, human. There are very few males inside the queendom of Orun. Any who enter the palace were required to leave their most treasured appendage. Only eunuchs live and worke in Queen Malika's sanctuary.

The queendom of Orun is comprised of the Queen Mother and her three princesses. Princess Fayola, a descendant of Princess Hatshepsut who became King of Egypt. Princess Eshe, a descendant of the Warrior Queen Njinga of the southern African nation of what is present-day Angola. And me, a descendant of Queen Amina in what is known in the present day as Nigeria.

The people of our nation came from the East when the Arabs raided villages as far back as the seventh century. As well as from the West when Europeans landed on our shores centuries later. Queen Malika slew what slave traders she could get her claws on. She freed as many of the captured as she could. She provides a safe harbor in Orun to any woman and child. Men she looks on with utter suspicion unless they are willing to pay her the ultimate tribute.

"Fornication and coitus are for animals and humans," Fay continues.

I've seen that for myself. Animals spend all day rutting in the fields. Humans make a lot of films and videos that feature screwing. They make as many home improvement videos featuring nails and hammers as they make of people getting nailed and hammered.

"We are called for a higher purpose in this life."

I know she's right. But sometimes, I simply want to get in touch with my lower, base needs. Like perhaps see a male vampire for the first time. See a real, live penis. Not a human one, of course. I'd never lower myself to sleep with one of those hairless apes.

But a virile, male vampire? With a throbbing cock? And a live vein that I could tap? Just the thought makes both my fangs and my loins ache.

"I'm off for my dinner," says Fay. "Are you joining me?"

"I'm not hungry," I say as I lick my fangs.

Fay heads out to slake her thirst. My stomach waits until she's gone before it growls with need. I'm not hungry for any of the limp dick eunuchs we brought along on this transcontinental journey. They avert their gazes when I feed from them. Even when I wear low tops and my breasts swell over the fabric. They have no zest for life and so they taste bland. For the first time in my life, I want to know what a real man tastes like.

If I can just find a way to get to Lucius Frangelico's party, I could find a thriving vampire male to slake my lust and maybe even my thirst with. But first, I'd need to find a way to slip goody-two-shoes Fay's notice. And I'd also have to get past the queen, who notices everything.

As if she heard my thoughts, the doors to my suite open. I turn to see the queen enter with two of her attendants, young males who are large with muscles. Their eyes are glazed over as most males who have had their manhood taken are.

"Sanai, hartlam, you should be resting."

Unlike Fayola, Queen Malika doesn't glide. She stalks into any space she occupies, like a lioness looking down on the bounty of animals she's considering taking a bite out of. She calls her three daughters hartlams; an amalgamation of heart and lamb. We were each given to her by our families, lambs to the slaughter whom she fed her heart's

blood to to turn us into vampire princesses to rule at her feet.

I bow my head as I address her. "I'm eager to begin the work we've come here for."

As the youngest of my sisters, I am only here to observe. Eshe has the reign of the queendom while we're away. It is Fayola who is being groomed for these diplomatic talks, though Fay has no taste for small talk, traveling, or anyone other than her queen and sisters.

At two hundred, the Queen Mother doesn't think I have enough experience of the world to handle our affairs on my own. I am hoping to prove her wrong on this trip. Which is going to be difficult if I get caught sneaking gout tonight. But, priorities. As long as I can tag along to her meeting tonight with the vampire king, I'm certain I can sneak away for a second during the talks to get the sneak peek of real life outside of the dry desert that I crave.

"That will have to wait until tomorrow," says the queen. "The journey has made me tired."

I raise my lowered head and gape at the queen. She isn't looking at me. She's gazing at one of her guards with a hungry glint in her dark eyes.

"I'd prefer to have a nice dinner and then rest," she says. "I've sent a message to the Serranos, but I was unable to get one to King Lucius. The telephonic at his den only rings and rings. I came looking for Fayola to deliver the message personally."

"I can do it."

I swallow down the eagerness in my voice, but it is too late. I'm sure she heard it. She doesn't miss anything. But to my surprise, Queen Malika nods.

"You are a growing girl. I should give you more responsibilities."

She hands me a card. On it is gold embossed letters with red trim. It reads Club Toxic along with an address.

“This is the location of Lucius’ den. I believe he had a private room reserved for our use. Cancel it and make sure we are not charged.”

“As you wish, my queen.”

I bow low, as low as I can go so that she can’t see the hungry gleam in my eye. When I rise, I go straight to my suitcase to find something to wear. I’m about to get up-up in da club.

CHAPTER THREE

Arneis

THE MASKED GOBLINS and superheroes have all gone inside for the night to gorge on their bounties in the safety of their homes. But the streets of downtown Tucson still teem with creatures of the night. Outside, the adult versions of superheroes with bare chests and barely covered nipples are all up to no good. But inside Club Toxic the costumes are black and white and from a time long past.

I take a moment to admire the Venetian theme of the party. It's something the upper crust of Tucson would put on. The men in dark suits, some with a hint of white lace and frills. The women in ball gowns and corsets, though most dresses are either form-fitting or barely there.

It was easy to throw together an outfit for this party. I simply had to go into my everyday closet. Black suits and ties were my mainstays. What I was missing was the mask.

"Councilman Durand."

I grimace at the sound of my name. Then wince at the man who said it. Jared Johnson stands at what I now know is the hidden entrance to the underbelly of Club Toxic.

"Thought you learned your lesson the first time," says the beefy bouncer with tattoos like a sleeve down one arm.

"Times must be hard in the warehouse district if you're bouncing here instead of in the ring of your own club."

I'd had a hand in shutting down the fighting ring Jared and his buddies had set up. But they'd figured out how to make the operation legal, something I'm sure Frangelico had a hand in. Must be why the man is here tonight protecting the Vampire King's assets. Jared isn't a vampire. I've seen him in the light of day. But he might be something else. Not only have I witnessed women with fangs and men who can wipe memories. I've seen people shift into jaguars.

Jared let's out a low growl as he eyes me. But his features shift from a menacing frown and into an amused smirk. "I guess you're the Serranos pet with those brothers tapping both your sisters'... veins."

I clench my fist. I didn't come here to get into a fight. I have an agenda, as any good follower of Robert's Rules of Order should.

Before coming in, I reviewed the minutes of my last meeting. Which had been difficult before a week ago, because I'd had my memory wiped. But now I remembered everything. I couldn't get the image of Domitia sinking her fangs into my neck out of my mind. When I tried, my vision clouded with my blood running down her chin, and then her carting my sister away.

I give my head a shake and focus on the mountain in front of me. The next item on my agenda is the roll call, the taking of attendance. "Where's Frangelico?"

"He's not available at the moment."

But he was here somewhere. I need to find him to tick off the next item on my agenda; the unfinished business between us.

"You can wait in the Serranos private room, seeing as you're part of their family now."

That grated. I would never claim those bloodsuckers as family. As soon as I had proof of this world, I'd get them away from my sisters. But I had to get the evidence first.

I pat the breast pocket of my shirt. The pin containing the spy camera is in place. It's online, feeding both sounds and images to a server back in my office.

Thanks to that news article, my word has been muddled. But the public can't argue with live video. I just needed to get down to the floor below.

The last time I was here, I tried to do things by the book. Now, I was stooping to another level. It is all that's left to me to protect my family. Hell, to protect the world. Mankind needs to know that these creatures, vampires, animal shifters, and who knew what else walked amongst us, feeding off of us, stealing our livelihoods. I would out the scourge and be labeled a hero. But first I need to get inside.

Jared steps aside. He waves his thick arm, allowing me passage. I take a step towards the dark hall, but before I descend something bright tugs at my attention.

I turn to look over my shoulder. Bodies are gyrating on the dance floor. The faces of the humans above ground are contorted in grins of pleasure. They think they've found heaven on the dance floor. They don't realize hell is beneath their feet.

My gaze slides past the crowd at the center of the room to the door. Coming into the entryway is an angel. She is light personified in the darkened club. Her brown skin shines like this morning's sun rays did as they warmed the Catalina Mountains.

With each step she takes, she casts the club in shadows. The room pales in muted black and white, while she is a rainbow of color. She wears a ball gown like the others on this night of Venetian revelry. There is a corseted bodice with ropes crossing over her chest. My fingers itch to play with the knots there, but my gaze dips to her flaring skirt where I'm sure a treasure is hidden. Her gown is an

intricate pattern of oranges and reds and blues. It reminds me of the parades on Juneteenth, the African American celebration of emancipation.

She stops in the entryway. Her bright gaze looks from the floor to the ceiling as she takes in the club. Her elegant head pans on her swan-like neck as she takes in the crowd of dancers. I can see her chest inflate as she breathes in the excitement, desire, and alcohol in the air. If possible, her eyes go brighter, her grin splits wider.

I want to make a motion for the world to stop spinning. Inside my pants, my penis raises to second the motion. My head forgoes any need for debate. My heart thumps as hard as a gavel to bang the motion into law.

“Durand? You in or you out?”

I blink, but she is still in my vision even as I turn back to Jared. For weeks, whenever I closed my eyes I can only see that white-haired vampire and her fangs. Not this time. The vision of light and color shines in my mind. I turn back to the exterior doors, but she is gone.

The door to the lower level of the club stands open for me. I need only to walk down there and gather my evidence. Perhaps when I come back up, I can find that glowing soul and get her out of this den of night creatures and to safety.

I take a step into the unknown and immediately wonder what the hell did I get myself into?

On the other side of the wall is a live porn show. And not the kind on a free site. This is what would be seen behind a paywall on the dark internet.

Set against the red velvet of the furnishings are men and women chained to crosses. The crystal chandeliers from above shine a light on their naked bodies. Some are bent over benches taking a thrashing with hands or long-tailed whips.

The problem is, none of what is happening is illegal. Even worse, there isn't a single fang or claw in sight for my

camera to capture as irrefutable proof of the supernatural being real.

"Mr. Serrano?"

A pretty woman smiles at me. She has feline features. It wouldn't surprise me if there are cat shifters in the world.

I open my mouth to correct her on my name but decide against it. Even though it grates. The Serrano name has got me this far. Hopefully, it will lead to pay dirt by the end of the night.

"Your private room is ready if you'll follow me."

CHAPTER FOUR

*S*anai

IT TAKES the darkness to cast the concrete city into color. Bright lights shine down onto the paved streets. Car horns roar as vehicles stampede up and down the way. Instead of the drab business suits and denim jeans I expected to see, the humans are out in spirited fashions.

Their ensembles range from barely-there approximations of professionals. Nurses with skirts the length of a Bandaid. Maids with their nipples dusting over their tops. Firemen without their shirts and police officers with their badges as the largest covering on their buff bodies.

The American celebration of Halloween has always baffled me. All over the continent of Africa, the different peoples celebrate their dead in a very different way. Of course, they dress in colorful garb and show off their tail feathers as all in the animal kingdom are want to do. But the festivals' main purpose is to celebrate the dead and assure them that they haven't been forgotten. Not to offer

candy to strangers dressed as skimpily as possible and then try to get laid.

Hmmm? I think I like this way better.

"Happy Halloween, my beautiful African Queen," a man dressed in a cowboy costume yells at me as he raises his right fist.

I suppose it would be easy to take me for a queen based on what I'm wearing tonight. The bazin I'm wearing was handmade by the women of my mother's tribe. The strapless bodice hugs my breasts tight,. The intricate knotting of the corset forces them to sit up high, but not high enough that my nipples dust over the top. The skirt flares from my hips in a cascade of oranges, reds, greens, and blues on a black background.

The patterns on the gown would bring to mind the kente cloth of West Africa. But the arrangement of the colors marks me as a princess and not a queen. Still, I do not correct the good ole boy. Because one day he'll be right.

Finally, I reach my destination. Club Toxic sits in the heart of the city. There is a line of humans trailing around the corner. The males were dark suits with masks. The women were tight gowns from a bygone era or strategically placed leather with collars around their necks.

Oh yes, I definitely like this way of celebrating the dead better.

A man beckons me to the front of the line. I had been headed there anyway. I'm the daughter of Queen Malika of the Orun, all lines lead to me as my right.

"Good evening, Princess Sanai. I was told your party wasn't coming."

"I was sent to assure you got that message. But since I'm here..."

His smile is crooked as he regards me. My nostrils twitch as I inhale. I've never smelled a male vampire before, but my instinct tells me he is something different. A dangerous beast; maybe a wolf?

Whatever he is, I see that he is taken. The gold band on his finger marks him as someone else's. So he likely won't be amenable to my plans for the night.

He reaches over and lifts the velvet rope. "Enjoy your evening, your highness."

I plan to do just that. I walk into the club and am hit with sensation overload. The music had been a pleasant thump in my ears outside the doors. Now inside, the beat quickens my pulse. The smell of arousal and desire make my mouth water.

We have regular dances at court where the people of our queendom gather to celebrate their savior and protector. During those performances, no man has ever gyrated against a woman in such a sexual manner. He's certainly never put his hand there and kept his most treasured appendage.

A man walks up to me. He licks his lips as he regards me. His teeth are flat, not a fang in sight. So he doesn't want to bite me. He's moving his hips to the beat of the song.

Does he want me to dance? I don't know the steps. Looking out on the dance floor, there doesn't appear to be any coordination in the movements.

He must assume I'm shy or confused, so he puts his hand on my hip. I stiffen. The queen has always said that men are filthy creatures. I don't enjoy the sweaty smell of this one. But I'm here to have an experience.

His hand slides down my hip. When it snakes around the back, my patience for diplomacy comes to a screeching halt. I hiss, flashing my fangs. A crack sounds over the music and I hear the cry of a little girl in pain. It's my dance partner. His arm is broken.

"Princess Sanai?"

I turn to find the large male who let me into the club looming over me. His hands are up, palms facing out towards me. It's a show of non-aggression.

"I'm sorry," I say, remembering the manners my human mother taught me before I became a vampire princess. "Was he yours?"

"Uh, no." The man says. He lowers his hands and his shirt shifts, revealing the tattoo of a wolf paw on his shoulder.

So, he is a wolf shifter. He makes a motion for me to hand over the handsy human. As I hand him over I see there is a rip in my dress.

"I'll make sure Frangelico gets the bill for the damage. In the meantime, I believe your party is already here in the private room the Queen requested."

Oh, the private room? That's what I was supposed to assure we weren't charged for. But the Serranos were already there? So, it appeared we would be charged anyway. Might as well take the meeting. Perhaps I could ease the way for the Queen's negotiations tomorrow night?

All around me, the party commences as though nothing happened. Humans rarely processed things that didn't please them. I'm taken to a hidden entrance at the side of the club. The curtains fall back and I am enveloped in red as far as the eye can see. But that's not what turns my fangs to sharp points.

I know of the sexual act. I've read about it in books, seen glimpses of it on the film recordings I've had smuggled into our desert oasis, and seen grainy and blurred snippets on the poor internet I've dialed into. But I've never witnessed it live.

There's a lot of nudity. Women are nude with tight nipples and reddened asses. There's also a nude male. His private parts under lock and key. I cock my head, trying to get a glimpse of his package to no avail.

"Mr. Serrano is just in here," says the woman who led me down into this well of sin. She has a button nose and perky ears that remind me of a kitten. I wonder if she's a cat shifter?

She'd said Mr. Serrano was here. One of the three infamous brothers is behind the door in front of me. The escapades of those brothers during the time of the Spanish Inquisition is legendary. They were known to torture victims sexually, a method known to sweeten the blood of humans. A male such as that could easily seduce an innocent such as me. I should back away from this door and return to the sanctuary of my queen.

I reach past the tiny hostess and turn the knob myself. Inside the door, I see the most delicious male I've ever encountered. His dark hair is tousled in a devil may care fashion. The fabric of his legs is molded to him, showing off his fit form. He wears a vest and jacket, but I can tell there is muscle beneath those layers.

Serrano takes me in as well. His dark eyes start at the hem of my dress and travel upward. I have the urge to lift my skirts to give him a better look. My nipples harden when his eyes reach my bodice. They push at the roped fabric aiming to dust their way out of my top. A throb occurs between my legs when he reaches my eyes. I've been aroused reading books and fantasizing, but the feeling has never been this strong.

I want this man. I want him on me. I want him over me. My fangs ache to have his taste inside me.

Vampire lovers feed from one another. But I've never had access to a male vampire. What will his blood taste like?

"You?" he says. "You work for Frangelico?"

"No. I work for no man."

His brow screws in confusion.

"I'm here on my own."

His features still don't relax. I feel like I'm saying the wrong things. As I struggle with the right things I've forgotten that we aren't alone in the room.

"You have the room until midnight. Enjoy."

The door shuts behind me. Then I hear a lock. Midnight is hours away. That's more than enough time to allow this sexy vampire to seduce me.

CHAPTER FIVE

*A*rneis

I HEAR the click of the lock as the door shuts. My mind is whizzing and whirring as I try to find order in this situation I find myself in. The angel from up above has been cast down into this pit of hell. Set against the white walls of the private room, she shines even brighter than when she was in the dim club.

Her brown skin is like that strong cup of coffee that unflinching gets me through a long, policy report filled with monotonous data and charts. My eyes drink her in and I am buzzed off the shot of dark roast.

She moves a step towards me and I get a hint of her sweet aroma. The tendrils of her scent curl into my nostrils, lifting my feet off the ground and bringing me face to face with her. Eye to eye. Mouth to... what is she saying?

"Which one are you?"

There is a lilt to her voice. She elongates her vowels. Her teeth catch on the consonants like they would take a bite out of them. When she says my name, it will be all softness.

"Mr. Serrano?"

And just like that, my tongue tastes bitterness. But the acrid aftertaste clears my head and reminds me why I'm here; to get evidence of vampirism. That won't happen with this human woman.

Does she know where she is? Vampires can wipe memories. I know that first hand.

A smile curls at the edge of her lips. I watch the stretch of her flesh and feel the urge to touch it, to taste it, to bite it. Some of the whirring in my head stops as I take her in anew. The woman is the very definition of regal. There's an up tilt to her chin which I'm willing to bet she never lowers. Her lashes are winged spikes at the tips as though even her eyes hold a crown.

Her gown would cast any Disney princess into the shade. Though when I look closer, I see there is a rip in the fabric of her dress. I take quick steps to her, taking the ruined fabric in my hands.

"Did they hurt you?" I ask.

She looks down at the fabric in my hand. I realize how inappropriate my action is and release my hold. Though my fingers clench into fists at the emptiness.

"A male tried to get fresh and I..." She purses her lips, as though holding in the words that were about to escape. Then she brushes the fabric back into place. "Management handled it."

Is she one of the sex slaves here? A beauty such as her, she would be a prize. Just looking at her I feel I am going out of my mind with want.

"Are you a slave?" I ask.

This room had been reserved for Gaius and Hadrian. Had they forced this woman in here for those two vampires to feed from? Or worse, have sex with? And what was pissing me off more? The fact that those bloodsuckers were cheating on my sisters? Or that they would lay a finger on this vision before me?

Her eyes flash at me. "No, colonizer. I'm not a slave. And I'll stake any man who tries to put me in the belly of a boat headed for the Atlantic."

"I'm sorry." I wince. "I didn't mean- What I'm trying to say-"

"Though I might be talked into chains."

My gaze snaps back to her. She's no longer standing before me. She has walked to the corner of the room where on the wall hangs rope, whips, and chains.

I hadn't had much time to take in the room before she arrived. Now I give the place a thorough investigation. At the center of the room is a cushioned table that might be found in a massage parlor. A tray of what could only be sex toys sits in another corner of the room. Colorful dildos and vibrators are lined up like soldiers awaiting orders.

She runs her hands over the chains hanging from the wall. She scraps her nails against the metal chains and over coarse rope. My cock, which had already been stirring in my pants, rises to attention. It punches against the front of my pants when she places her hand on her chest, on the rope mesh that crosses her skin there. I have an urge to rip the bottom of her dress down and use the top to bind her.

I give my head a shake. I have no idea where that thought came from? Does it make me racist to want to tie a Black woman up?

What I do know is that my thoughts make me no better than the people on the other side of that door. No one out on the floor looked as though they were doing anything against their will. But they may have had their will stolen from them.

I've learned that vampires can hold others in their thrall when you look them directly in their eyes. I look directly into her eyes. When I do I feel lost, like I'm falling. What if she is under another's thrall? What if she is only here at a vamp's command?

"Why are you here?" I ask.

"I wanted to meet you." Her grin turns sheepish. The woman is fondling sex toys but only now does she seem to blush. "You're not what I expected."

Of course, I'm not. I'm not one of the undead Serrano monsters. "What did you expect?"

"That you would pounce on me the moment the door was closed."

Pounce? Does she mean sexually or hungrily? I had to assume she knows what the Serranos are. But my mind is too focused on the suggestion in her words.

"Is that what you want?" I ask.

She lets go of the chains. I watch her hand glide down her body and come to settle at her middle. She folds them together, her head bowed. I have a vision of her like that, on her knees. Her mouth level with my cock as I lift her chin with my index finger.

The thought rocks me back on my heels. Then I am rocked forward with how much I want that dream to become a reality. It's been a long time since I've been in a relationship. I've never been as randy for a woman as I am just looking at her.

She lifts that proud chin up. "What I want is..."

There is a hiss from the other side of the room. Sanai turns and backs into me. I wrap an arm around her, ready to protect her from any danger. But the danger isn't in front of her, it's behind her. My cock punches the front of my pants as her skirts brush against me.

A curtain opens to a scene on the other side of the glass. Before us is the floor of the underground sex club. I'm sure the mirror is one way because no one is looking in at us. All eyes are on the scene on the floor.

A naked woman kneels on the floor. A fully-clothed man paces around her. The woman bares her neck. The male flashes his fangs. He knicks her finger and laps up the blood trickling there.

With that little show, my camera has caught what I need. I have evidence of the existence of vampires.

I can leave now. But my feet are rooted to the spot in this private room. Not because I'm interested in the show on the other side of the glass. Because I'm attuned to the woman standing in front of me.

Sanai steps back into me. I hiss as her ass full on grazes my cock. She stiffens and turns to glance over her shoulders.

"You have an erection," she says, surprise in her voice. "Is that because of me? Or because of the show?"

I'm having trouble finding my voice. She's still pressed against me. Her voice is in my ears. And now her scent is in my nose. It's too much for any man to function.

"I've never aroused a man before," she says turning slowly until she faces me. "The queen doesn't allow virile men in the palace. Can I touch it?"

CHAPTER SIX

*S*anai

THE BULGE in his pants fascinates me. I can see it snake and uncoil like a viper against the dark fabric of his trousers. He hisses in a gasp as I take a step. His body tenses, as though preparing to strike. Can he sense that I will bare my flesh for his bite?

I take another step, enthralled by the danger pulsating between his thighs. It pulses, like a drum against the front of his pants. My body begins to sway in time to its beat. I reach my hand to him, but he grasps my wrist. I glance up into his face.

There's a mix of desire and shock there. His gaze is narrowed on me, but his dark eyes shine in the dimly lit room. His lips are pulled back from his teeth, but his teeth are clenched. His skin is flushed, a redness touches his strong cheekbones. He must have eaten recently.

That thought bothers me. I hear that male vampires bite their lovers during the sexual act. I have only been bitten by the Queen Mother during my turning. It was an experience that I would be happy to forget.

"I don't understand why you're so surprised?" I say. "Your reputation precedes you. Serranos are known for their sexual exploits."

"I'm not..."

His voice is choked as he tries to speak. It sounds dry as though he is thirsty. I step closer, tilting my head to the side and baring the column of my throat. But when he looks at my offering his expression is pained.

I snatch my hand out of his grasp and take a step back. A flush creeps across my cheeks. "You're not interested in me?"

The thought hadn't even entered my brain before this very moment. In the palace, the jewel-less males all avert their gazes at my sisters and I. In the village beyond the castle, I know the males look at my form. But only under the cover of their lashes and from a distance, never up close and directly.

There were plenty of people who looked like me at the time he was born in Rome, as well as during his escapades during the Spanish Inquisition. But perhaps my looks are not to his tastes?

I look nothing like the wispy, pale-skinned women on the streets. Or the one who is on her knees on the other side of the glass between the two males as one kisses her mouth and the other kisses her breasts. I don't have the experience of being kissed, let alone the knowledge of what it's like to be with one man.

I should probably get out of this room and have my first experience with a human instead of a half millennia old vampire. I must look like a child at play to him.

"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life," he says.

"What did you say?"

His voice still sounds hoarse, so I'm not entirely sure I heard him correctly. That's not true. My hearing is superior. I know what he said, I just want him to say it again.

He opens his mouth to speak. My body sways towards him eager to gulp down a second helping of his words. Of their own accord, my fingers uncoil, and quick as a snake, they strike out and cup his manhood.

Instead of the words I'd longed to hear, he hisses again. His breath is a spicy mist that hits my nostrils. His eyes slit closed and his lips spread into a grimace of ecstasy.

"I have never felt such power," I say as I handle him. He is thick in my palm. I can not gather the fullness of his length in my hand. He spills over the edges of my thumb and pinky finger. "I wonder if this is why the Queen cuts them off?"

My back is flung against a wall. With one hand, he moves my hand from the front of his pants and presses it over my head. With his other hand, his fingers weave into the ropes of my corset and he cups my breasts. I hiss out a breath of pure pleasure. No one has ever touched me there.

"I must be out of my mind," he says. His lips hover just over mine. "This is not what I came here for."

"This is exactly what I came here for," I say. "To meet you."

His gaze travels over my face. Those dark eyes linger on my lips, and I can feel their heat. "I'm not who you think I am."

"You're not one of the Serrano brothers?"

He winces as he meets my gaze. "Technically, yes. I am."

I don't think I'd care if he wasn't. I want him. I'd thought any man would do, but I wouldn't trade places with the woman on the other side of the glass. She has two men's hands on her. And they're...

Well, that's interesting.

On the other side of the glass, one of the men continues to kiss the woman on her mouth. The other one is spreading her thighs. The second man goes to his knees and then he puts his mouth on her... there.

I didn't know such a thing was done. Her body is trembling. From her head down to her toes which are bouncing off the floor as both men lap at her orifices.

"I want to kiss you," says Serrano.

My chest heaves. I want him to kiss me too. But now I'm thinking of kissing in a whole new light.

I turn back to him just in time to meet his lips. He's pressing his hard body into me, but his lips are soft. I'd expected roughness. He is a man after all. But he handles me with care.

His lips speak of urgency as they press into mine. But each brush is a whisper. Each touch a sigh. It makes me want him more.

When his tongue sneaks out of his mouth and licks at my upper lip, my body sings a new tune. When his teeth tug at my lower lip, I hear the drums again. The pulsing beat of him fills my ears. I want to dance with him. To shimmy my chest and shake my hips. Preferably while on top of him.

I would let this man bite me if he wanted. I want him to let me. I want to know what he tastes like. But I know that blood exchange between two vampires is a delicate dance, so I take his kiss and pray for patience as the rhythm intensifies.

CHAPTER SEVEN

*A*rneis

IT'S BEEN a while since I've kissed a woman. A long while. So long, in fact, that I can't remember the name of the last woman I kissed. Or her face.

My vision is fogged over with ebony clouds as I run my hands through her hair. I dig my fingers into the soft tufts of her coiled locks and feel like I'm floating. Pulling her close, I anchor her body to mine. If I am going to sail away it's going to be while I'm moored to this exquisite creature in my arms.

I'd forgotten how soft a woman's lips are. Or is that just her softness?

I'd forgotten the velvety warmth of a woman's tongue. Or is that just her heat?

I want to investigate every crevice of her. I want to take my time and explore her valleys and curves. But she is anxious in my hold, impatient.

Her body moves against mine, more like an oncoming storm than a sedate, fluffy cloud on a sunny day. Her moans

are a thunderous pleading. Her eyes flash open and the desire inside strikes like lightning.

I pull away to catch my breath. However, both my body and her lips protest. A low, keening cry comes from the other side of the glass. We are both momentarily distracted as we turn to see a new scene.

A woman is being tied up. The man who binds her is dressed in black. The rope in his hands is golden. The woman doesn't fight the confinement. Her eyes are glazing over as though the golden strands are an extension of her lover's caress. The brilliant strands are zigzagging streaks against the black of her dress; like contained lightening.

"Please," says the beam of light before me.

The sound of her begging flips a switch in me. I want to hold her captive so that I can taste the fire inside her. I want to bind her to me while I thrust into the eye of her storm. I want to catch lightning in a bottle and I don't care if I get burned.

On the other side of the glass, the cries of pleasure have turned to gargled pants as the man face fucks the woman he's bound. I worry the poor woman is choking, but she tilts her head back for more. It looks depraved. It looks dirty. It looks demeaning.

"Please," says the spark of radiance in my arms.

Suddenly, I want to tip her head back by her chin and shove my cock down that elegant throat of hers.

I don't know where these thoughts are coming from? All of my past girlfriends have been conservative in the carnal department. Missionary twice a week had been good enough for them. They'd barely touched my cock with their hands, much less had it anywhere north of their stomachs. I'd never gone down on a woman.

Now my mouth hungers for it. My tongue aches for it. My lips part, ready to take it.

I back away from the temptation trapped in this room with me. But I don't go far. I reach for the rope on the wall.

When I turn back, her breaths are shallow as she eyes the ends of the twine swinging in my hand.

"Sit down," I say.

She does as I command. Her slender fingers gather the fabric of her gown. She lifts the material as she places herself onto the cushioned table. I am treated to the sight of her lean ankles and a hint of her sculpted calf. My fingertips tingle, and I haven't even touched her yet.

I come to kneel before her with rope in hand. I take her left calf and position it to the metal leg of the massage table. Then I unravel the corded rope.

The corded braid hits the floor. The light thumps match the pounding of my heart, as well as the pulsing of my dick as it anticipates what I am about to do. Luckily, I was an Eagle Scout. I know how to tie a knot.

I crisscross the ropes over her skin. The pattern isn't as pretty as the man who'd bound the woman outside, but the clove hitch knot will serve my purpose. It will join her leg to the bedpost and will hold her captive while I explore the depraved thoughts racing through my head.

"What's your name?"

"Sanai."

"That's beautiful," I say as I take her right calf into my palm. Her skin is smooth in my hand, but I feel a zap of energy skate across my knuckles.

"It means brilliance."

I look up at Sanai and grin. She smiles down at me. In the darkened room, I feel I am drowning in sunlight.

"Call me Arneis."

"What does that mean?"

"It's a type of grape found in the hills of Roero in Italy." I finish the loop and give the rope a tug, tightening its hold on her leg, ensuring she can not escape. "It translates to little rascal."

I reach for the edges of Sanai's gown. Slowly, I slide up the dress. The gown had flared about her legs like a

mermaid's tail. As I raise it, the black trim of the fabric bunches into the splashes of red as her knee caps are revealed. The blue patterns of the design fold into the green stencils as the tops of her thighs are bared to me.

I have been between a woman's thighs. But I've only ever aimed my cock and thrust. I have never actually looked.

With her ornate gown gathered at her waist, I move my hands to Sanai's knees to spread her apart. Her lace black panties hide nothing from my eyes. The lush decadence of her scent knocks me back on my heels and that's when I realize my folly.

How am I going to get her panties off without untying her? Because I have no intention of setting this woman free until I've had my fill of her. Possibly, not even after that.

I reach for the lace with unsteady fingers. Above me, Sanai's breathing increases. I've never had a woman want it this much before. Her desire only fuels me.

Fuck it. I take the thin scrap of lace between both of my thumbs and index fingers and I pull. The scrap of material easily gives way and leaves me with no further obstruction to my desires.

There is truly nothing between me and the lips I want to kiss. Sanai is completely shaved. Brown skin meets the darkest pink and my mouth waters. All thought stops and I can only feel. And the first thing I feel is those lips of hers on mine.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*S*anai

IN MY CULTURE back two hundred years ago when I was born, nudity was not dwelled upon. Both men and women walked around half, or sometimes fully, bared with no thought from others. Leering, rape or other sexual violence was unheard of as it was punishable by the gods, namely a vengeful matriarch who would rip a perpetrator's throat out with her teeth.

It was only after I was given in offering to Queen Malika that I came to believe that my body was special. That it was blasphemy for a man to look upon even my face, much less my bared chest. Right now, I spread my thighs for Arneis.

My knees quiver with anticipation at what he'll do. I know what he'll do. He's going to lick me between my legs, a place that's never been touched before. Not even by me.

But he's not touching me yet. He only stares, gazing at the heated flesh between my thighs. I feel myself growing wet under his attention. I can tell he likes what he sees. His breaths are shorter, shallower, like a cheetah who has

chased down his prey and is stalking closer, readying to sink his teeth in.

My hips jerk at the thought of Arneis's fangs piercing my flesh.

"Hold still," he says. "I want to remember every detail of this moment."

Arneis gives a tug of the rope, tightening my ankles to the posts. I'm strong enough to break the knots and the clever ties with a kick. I'm sure he knows this. I don't think the physical restraint is the point of this exercise. I think he wants me to hold still of my own free will. The bindings are likely there as a reminder that I am under his power. He is hundreds of years older than me and could easily overpower me.

Just the thought thrills me. I have never been submissive to a man. It's not in my nature. But being bound by this man, following his commands, I feel as though I am evolving in real-time.

The cries of the woman on the other side of the glass pierce my ears. She too is bound and at the mercy of the male towering over her. Her head is bowed as he thrusts into her body from behind. Her eyes are glazed over in pure ecstasy. If that's what I'll receive for handing my will over to this man, I am ready to be bound from head to toe.

Arneis dips his head between my bound thighs. The light stubble on his cheek grazes the sensitive flesh there. My breath catches as he exhales and a warm breeze rustles my intimate skin. He hasn't even gotten to his final destination yet, but I am ready to submit. He's overpowered me with just the thought of what he's about to do.

In anticipation, my right leg bounces against the leg of the cot. In excitement, my heel raises and goes up on the ball of my foot. I feel the rope against my leg. It presses into my skin in a warning that I do not heed. And then I hear a twine snap.

Arneis's head pulls back, all the way back to my knees. His dark gaze latches onto mine. I want to beg for forgiveness. I want to plead for another chance.

"I'll be good," I say, pressing my freed leg back into the cot's post. "I'll hold still."

A grin spreads across his handsome face. I feel like a pet who just got the praise of its master. This man is about to own me. I'd be down on my knees panting for a treat if I weren't so focused on keeping those same knees apart.

There's no more dawdling. Arneis pushes my knees apart, as far as they'll go while in the rope's grasp. I feel a puff of his hot breath. Then the nuzzle from the tip of his nose. And then the velvety wetness from the tip of his tongue.

My head falls back. I struggle to keep myself upright, but my arms want to collapse in surrender. He only gives a few tentative licks before his lips close around mine and he's sucking at me.

The pleasure is unlike anything I've ever known. Unlike anything I could've imagined. I'd always thought a male's penis went into the vagina. He's putting his tongue in mine. Does the queen know about this? If she did know, none of the servants would be able to speak from the loss of their tongues.

Arneis laps at me like I'm a fruit. My heels are off the floor again. I cannot help it. But I keep my knees wide for him. The last thing I want is for him to stop.

I dig my nails into the cot, feeling the plastic covering give way under my nails. I'm shaking now. A deep pressure is building inside of me. The weight of it started in my core, but I feel it radiating outward. Gravity is reversing inside of me as Arneis's hot tongue moves from my most secret entrance to the tip of my sex.

He encircles that small bud first with his tongue. Then with his lips. When his teeth graze the bundle of nerves, my

world turns upside down. The force that was holding my inner world together let's go and I crash.

My thoughts scatter as I scream my pleasure. My arms give way and I collapse back onto the cot. I want to press my legs closed, to try to contain the pulsing from within that has yet to recede. Surely, I can't take much more of this? I'm going to drown if the waves of bliss continue this assault.

But I can't close my legs. Something is obstructing me. Or rather someone.

Arneis has not stopped licking me. He suckles me harder, causing the waves to surge once more and pull me deeper down into delirium. I'm nearly out of my mind, but I do not come out of the remaining binding on my leg. I do not want him to stop.

He doesn't stop. He inserts a finger into my core where his tongue already eased the way. The pressure that was still crashing over me increases. I can't believe it's possible but it builds, rising even higher. The pressure that is building feels different this time. Its weight doesn't feel solid, it feels liquid.

Arneis works his fingers in and out of my core as he licks. He crooks his finger. Like a pirate using a treasure map, his fingers hit a spot. The pressure crashes against me again, but this time I feel moisture trickle down my legs as my body convulses.

Oh no. Have I embarrassed myself? My bladder hadn't been full when I came in. The liquid isn't golden. It's clear and Arneis is lapping it up as it continues to pour from me.

My inner muscles clench around his fingers. My pussy grabs for his tongue. My incisors sharpen.

His eyes are closed as he moans and laps at me. He is pulling my essence from me. Perhaps my very soul.

I need him in my mouth. His cock. His neck. Anything of him. But he is not stopping his licks. I am shaking

uncontrollably when he pulls another bout of the clenching pleasure from me.

That is it. I can take no more. I kick free of the bindings. I go to reach for him when he sits back on his haunches and unbuckles his pants. My gaze fixes on the treat he unwraps for me.

The head of his cock is pulsing red with desire. I want to sink my teeth into it.

CHAPTER NINE

*A*rneis

I WASN'T a man given to wanting more than my fair share. I hadn't grown up with a silver spoon in my mouth. I had grown up with a silver cork in my hands. With a twist of my wrist, I could unscrew any vintage stored in any bottle.

But tonight, with the curves undulating in my hands, I was completely screwed.

I am drunk on Sanai's taste. Not tipsy. Beyond intoxicated. My brain is addled on the taste of her. I was falling down, fucked up, and thirsty for more.

I've never had a woman come on my tongue. I've never put my tongue on a woman, but I couldn't help myself. Even as I pull away from her, I want more. Her orgasm was so powerful that she shook my knot loose at her ankle.

The need to be inside her consumes me. The night of firsts continues for me. My first time tying up another human being. My first time eating a woman's pussy. My first time fucking on the first date.

If this were any other night, I would've gotten her phone number. I would've called, in the evening after work. We

would've chatted about our work, our goals in life, what our current retirement portfolio was comprised of. The normal getting to know you banter.

This isn't a normal night. She is not the average woman. I am not my orderly, rule-abiding self. Things are out of order and I wouldn't have them any other way.

I pull back from Sanai, trying to figure out how to unbuckle my pants. She sits up, her gown falling over her spread legs and hiding those lush lower lips from my view.

I want to growl at her to stay put. But she steps down from the padded table. She is on her knees, face level with my straining cock. The sight of Sanai crawling towards me is burned forever into my soul. It will be the only thing I want to see for the rest of my days.

Her hand goes to my cock. I can't even remember taking it out of my buckled pants. Somehow it found its own way to her.

"Please," she says. "May I?"

She tilts that proud chin of hers back. The golden sparkle in her dark eyes flashes at me. My dick lifts up, my hips thrust towards her.

I have never had a woman suck my cock. Not any of the prim misses that I have dated. It was something you would ask a prostitute or a mistress to do. Since I'd never had or planned to have either, I'd never considered the act.

Sanai carries herself with a regal air. She is destined to be a trophy on some lucky man's arm. A savage part of me is willing to kill for the honor of being that worthy male.

Right now she looks at my dick like it's the trophy. I had just buried my thighs between her legs. I'm a staunch supporter of equal opportunity for women. So...

Her first lick makes my toes curl in my shoes. When she wraps those perfect lips around the head, I have to reach behind her to use the massage table for balance. I am a man who is always in control. But when I feel the scrape of

her incisors against my sensitive flesh, I nearly spend in her mouth.

The thought of a bite, in a place like this, should send me reeling back into the dark recesses of my mind. Back to the horror-laced vision of a white-haired demon taking a pound of flesh and blood from me. But Sanai's accidental graze has my balls tightening.

Maybe I've developed a fetish as part of my PTSD from the incident? I am having sex in the den of a vampire night club, with a woman I only met less than an hour ago. A woman who makes me feel like I'll die if I don't come inside of her.

Sanai protests as I pull her off my cock. She releases my dick with a pop. The spark in her gaze is now fire.

"I need to be inside of you," I say.

"You were just inside of me." Her tone is saucy, her lips in a petulant frown.

"Get back on the table." My voice is low, hard. I'm running low on patience and I need her to obey me. "Now."

Her breath catches. The fire in her eyes ignites. She likes being bossed around. Good, because I need her to hold still while I fuck her senseless.

Sanai lifts her gown and prowls backward onto the table. My gaze latches onto the flushed skin between her legs. It still glistens from my earlier attention.

My hands find the rip in her dress. I take the ruined fabric and rip out a strip. Sanai gasps at my handiwork, but she does not protest. I use the material from her dress to bind her hands together. This time I tie a butterfly knot. The loops of the knot, along with the colors of the fabric, adorn her skin and make my dick even harder.

Once she's bound I kneel between her thighs. Part of me wants to rip the entire gown to shreds and refashion the design by tying her down to the table. But my cock is impatient.

I don't have a condom and I realize I don't care. I know I'm clean because I haven't been in a relationship for months. If she has something, I'll catch it too because there is no way I'm not getting inside this woman. If a child results...

The thought knocks some sense into me. Not the sense to pull the head of my cock away from her entrance. It knocks me flush up against her swollen lips. Because the thought of this woman with her belly swollen with my babe is the most erotic thing ever.

I push into her. At first, the way is easy. She is still slick from my tongue. She is also tight.

Sanai winces as I breech her flesh. I hope to God she's not hurt because I don't want to stop. I can't stop.

Her inner walls don't try to push me out. Her muscles grab hold of me, trying to suck me deeper inside. I oblige and push in further.

Sanai gasps. Her eyes are wide with what looks like surprise. Her lips part and a low moan escapes her mouth.

My brain is so fogged over with desire and ecstasy that I can't remember the difference between the sound of pain and the sound of pleasure. Pulling out of her exquisite channel is unfathomable. But so is the thought of causing this woman any pain.

When her legs wrap around my ass, I know she likes it. When she lifts her hips to meet my thrusts, I know she wants more.

"Deeper," she begs.

I oblige. There is no more resistance as I slide all the way into her warm depths. My balls rock up against her ass. I pull her hips down, trying to gain another inch deeper inside of her.

Sanai's back arches off the table, a shudder ripples through the length of her body. I feel her toes curling on the back of my calf. Her knees press into my hips. Her flat stomach trembles as she exhales a sigh of contentment. Her

bound arms stretch over her head and her fingers unfurl and reach out.

"Harder," she pleads.

I've never taken a woman roughly before. But the suggestion sounds like the perfect order of business. I withdraw slowly, feeling the clutching of her inner walls along the way. Once only the tip remains inside of her, I ram back to where I came from in one swift thrust. We both cry out at the impact.

I continue to drive into her. She lifts her hips to meet my movements, impaling her tight sheath on my shaft. Her words make no sense like she's speaking in tongues. But somehow I am able to understand every one of her entreaties.

I take her fast, hard, deep. I do not stop. Not even when she is shaking with another orgasm.

Her hands pull against the binds, but she doesn't break that knot. The sight of this woman pinned beneath me as I thrust into her is all I want for the rest of my days.

I want to hold her still while I give her more pleasure than she can handle. I want her to behave while I have my way with her. I want to take my fill of her so that I can give her what she needs.

I can feel my climax coming. When her sex clenches around me from another orgasm, I let go. I throw my head back and roar as my seed shoots into her.

It is bliss. I feel complete, whole where I didn't know something had been missing. But something is still missing.

I feel Sanai's hands on my back. When had she broken free of the bindings? How had she broken free?

She smiles at me, a dazed look in her eyes. Then I catch it. The dim light of the room glints off something sharp in her mouth.

Fangs.

She's still moving against me. Her core still pulling at my semi-hard dick. She opens her mouth and strikes my neck.

My mind struggles to understand what's happening. The beautiful angel I want to be the mother of my children is feeding from me. It should be wrong. But it feels so right.

There is a pinch of pain when her teeth pierce the skin at my neck. Something tells me to jerk away from the pain. To break free. To run.

A louder voice in my head tells me not to. I listen to that voice. Sanai's lips wrap around the point where she's punctured my skin. She pulls at the jugular vein in my neck and it's a total knock out.

The bliss pulls me under as her tongue laps at my skin. She moans around the wound she's given me as she takes her sustenance. My dick comes alive inside her channel. With her next sip of my blood, my body explodes in another orgasm.

All resistance goes out of me as I come hard, harder than a moment ago. With her inner muscles pulling at my dick and her mouth pulling at my vein, I am lost. But something keeps whispering in my mind.

Something important that I should be wary of. Something that keeps trying to worm its way between me and this woman. This creature. This...

Vampire.

CHAPTER TEN

*S*anai

HIS BLOOD IS like nothing I've ever tasted. I've had many men on my tongue. But none of them were virile and full of life. Apparently, something gets taken from a man when his manhood is snipped. The moment Arneis Serranos's blood hits my tongue I know that I will never be satisfied with another man's. Regardless of whether that blood donor is intact or not.

As his potent blood slides down my throat I feel another orgasm rising inside of me. This time when I find my release, it's not just my body that shivers. My entire spirit explodes, like a supernova that leaves me with a new shining soul.

I've lived for two hundred years, but now I feel alive. When my eyes open, I see new hues and tones in the colors of the world. My ears hear not only Arneis's heartbeats but the working of the valves that pump his delectable blood through his body. My mind feels like the grooves laid in my brain have been repaved with a new understanding of the world around me.

What I don't understand is why Arneis is pulling away from me?

Why is he looking at me with such horror on his handsome face?

Then it dawns on me. I should've known better than to take his blood without asking first. With a human, I have never had asked. They have only ever been sustenance to me. But we vampires can't make our own blood, which is why we feed off of mankind.

I'm not sure how it works between two vampires who can't make their own blood? Will we need to have a human to replenish our stores. The idea of his mouth on another makes me see red; the human's spilled blood as I slit their throat.

Arneis backs away from me. Scrambles is more like it. He pulls up his pants as he does so.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I should've asked first."

"You're a vampire."

His words are not what I expect him to say. I was expecting a scolding. Perhaps I'd been looking forward to a punishment. Maybe that's why I bit him without permission.

"Of course I am," I say. "Are you going to bite my ass as a punishment?"

I expected Arneis to flash his fangs at me. Instead, he grinds his molars. The look of disgust that he gives me chills the blood on my tongue. My saucy grin turns downward as I watch Arneis's lips curl.

I've never tasted another vampire's blood. I've only tasted eunuchs blood. It's not possible that Arneis is human.

Is it?

"You're not..."

"A monster like you," he sneers.

Any hint of desire has fled from his features. His hand grazes his neck where I bit him. It comes away with a tiny smear of blood on his thumb.

My mouth waters at the sight. He catches it and takes another step away from me. I pull my dress over my legs and tuck my knees under me.

It's true; he's human.

I have failed so hard tonight. I didn't do as I was told and cancel this room. It got used and used well. And now I see I've given my virginity away, and not to an ageless vampire of a renown line. But to a human male no less. I had been prepared to take some risks with my actions this night. The queen will cast me out when she learns of how royally I've screwed up.

"You enthralled me," Arneis accuses.

My head snaps up at that. "I did no such thing."

"It's the only explanation." He tightens his belt, looping the leather inside the buckling and closing the clasp.

On the other side of the glass, the man is pounding into the woman. The sounds of her wet sex are louder than her cries and his grunts. But all I can hear is the disdain and disgust in Arneis's voice.

"I would never sleep with someone like you," he says.

"Someone like me?"

"It's not my first time being attacked by one of your kind."

"Attacked?"

Arneis's hand goes to his neck. Not the side where a few drops of blood trickle from my bite. There is a wound healed over on the other side of his neck. Whoever put it there was careless, as though they intended to cause him pain.

"Don't try to mind wipe me," he says turning back to face me.

I've never tried the tactic. The humans in our hidden oasis know who and what we are. They keep our secrets. Outsiders have never found us out in the heart of the desert.

"You think I'd make you forget what happened between us?" I ask.

His gaze finds mine then. The anger and disgust slips. I see the man who desired me only moments ago. The man who had been so deep inside of me that I couldn't remember what being apart from him was like.

I know he sees it too. But only for a second. And then he shuts himself to me.

"I recorded everything," he's saying, tapping a button on his shirt. "The feed has gone straight to a hard drive that's set to go live if I don't stop it."

With my sharp vision, I see that there are gears inside the object. A lens stares back at me. A camera has recorded what just happened between us. Meaning my first and only lover has recorded a sex tape of me. Could I be any more naive?

"Now the world will know about your kind."

Looks like I could be a bit more naive than originally thought. Arneis would expose not only me but the secrets of the vampire world. I would've have failed just my queen, I'd have failed my entire race of people. There's a part of me that worries that he will be hunted and killed if he shares any details of the supernatural world. But there's another part of me that hurts worse than that shame.

"You'd put what we shared on display for the world to see?" I say.

Arneis's jaw tenses at that thought. Something proprietary goes over his features. His thumb fumbles as it rubs at the device on his shirt. The rest of his fingers scratch at his chest, where his heart beats.

I gaze into his eyes. I feel his will. He is strong. But I'm stronger.

I could do it. I could dive into his mind, tug at his will, and make him forget. I could make him do my bidding.

Arneis looks at me as if he knows what I'm thinking. His hand falls away from the device, from his heart. He holds

still under my gaze, as though he's daring me to do it. Or willing me to.

We stare at each other for long moments. Both unguarded as memories of the past hour play in our eyes. My channel aches from the loss of him. My fangs throb for another taste of him. My heart beats against my chest, urging me to close the distance between us.

I hear his heart beating a rapid rhythm as well. I scent the arousal coming off his body. I see his hands clench around the air. And then I watch as he walks away from me and out the door without a word.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*A*rneis

SHE'S A MONSTER. That's what I keep telling myself as I drive away from the club. But my mind goes back to the look in her eyes when I'd called her that to her face.

She could've lashed out at me. Literally or physically. But she hadn't.

At first, she'd seemed embarrassed by her actions. Apologetic, even. There had been hurt there.

Hurt that I'd put there. Sanai had looked lost and small when she'd come to realize I was disgusted by who she was.

No. Not who she was. What she was.

She was a monster. A demon that fed off of mankind for sustenance as well as amusement.

She'd kissed me like I was a treat. I'm sure she'd only done that because she was warming me up, making my blood sweeter like the fermentation process with grapes. I had learned vampires liked the taste of human blood when they were sexually aroused. Hell, I'd been inside her when she'd bitten me. Had she worked me up enough to give

herself a toothache? Because dammit if my teeth weren't clenching now from the thought of that bite.

God, that bite. When her fangs had impacted me, I'd come again. Harder than the first time. Just the thought of her fangs grazing my neck had my dick jumping.

What in the hell was wrong with me? Was I forgetting what she was? She was a monster who had taken a piece out of me.

Except, this time I'd liked it. I'd gotten off on it. I wanted to turn the car around and have her bite me again.

At a stop sign, I reach for my neck. The twin puncture marks throb as I graze them. There is no pain. With only a slight touch my body shudders as it remembers the feel of her lips on my skin. I shiver at the memory of how her throat worked to pull my blood from me. My dick throbs in my pants wanting in on the action.

That had not happened the first time with that nightmare Domitia. That wound still smarted from when she'd ripped my flesh. When I touch it now my passion for Sanai cools.

But not entirely. Her taste is still on my tongue. The vision of her laid out before me as an offering will never leave my mind.

Why hadn't she taken these thoughts of her, these memories of us from my mind? Was that her play? To leave me wanting more of her?

I yank the video pin from my shirt. I have the evidence in my hands to expose this world to all of humanity. To expose her. To have her hunted.

The thought of any pain coming to Sanai makes my gut sicken. The thought of anyone seeing her body exposed makes me rage.

I drop the pin. It clatters to the floorboard of the car. I give it my heel, twisting the circuitry for good measure.

I pull out my phone and call up the app. My finger hovers over the delete key for the stream. My thumb feels heavy as

I press it. Somehow, instead of the delete key, I managed to hit play.

Sanai's face comes into view. Her smile is appraising as she comes closer to the camera. Her gaze dips up and down, her brows lifting as though they like what she sees.

"You work for Frangelico?" Those were my words, the first I'd said to her.

"No," comes that sultry voice that makes my skin tingle. "I work for no man."

I sit in the middle of the street out in the middle of wine country. Instead of putting my car in park, my foot stays on the brake. My thumb stays away from the delete button as I watch the entire scene between me and Sanai play out.

"You're not what I expected," she says.

I can only see her face in the video, fitting as she came up to my chest. Her gaze constantly roams up and down my body. A few times she licks those lush lips. But as hard as I stare at her, I don't see carnivorous hunger. Only carnal.

She said I wasn't what she expected. She was not what I expected. I had gone into that club to take the supernatural world down. In truth, Sanai had brought me to my knees with just a smile.

I was on my knees in the video. The only view I got was of the floor. But I heard her cries of pleasure as my tongue worked to master her. I caught sight of her foot tethered to the post of the massage table. The sight of the twine crisscrossing her trim ankles made my dick pulse.

"I'll be good," she says. "I'll hold still."

That's what I truly wanted, for her to hold still while I tasted every inch of her skin. For her to behave as I fucked her senseless. For her to be bound to me for the rest of our lives.

And then I hear myself calling her a monster.

The camera catches her face as her regal features fall. Her lip trembles before it stiffens. Her throat works before that elegant column lengthens. And then she is gone.

She hadn't attacked me. She hadn't walked away from me. I'd left her. And I have no idea how to find her again.

I lift my foot from the break. The car rolls forward. With a tap of the gas pedal, I am back in motion.

My car stops in front of the Serrano vineyard. I had been heading home, but I feel the need to be around family.

The door at the front of the Serrano manse isn't locked. Why would it be? The males inside would scent any danger as it came into the gate. They could rip out the throat of any threat.

When I walk inside, I find both men with their arms wrapped around my sisters. Cari is curled in Hadrian's lap, her head resting on his heart. Marechal sits next to Gaius, her head leaning against his shoulder.

On the television is the old black and white family sitcom, *The Munsters*. The show where Frankenstein's monster and his vampire bride live in a suburbia that struggles to accept them.

"Arnie, you came."

"Ouch," I grunt as I'm nearly crushed when Cari embraces me.

"Careful, Carignan," warns Hadrian. "Unless you want to break your brother."

"Sorry, Arnie," Cari says as she pulls away. "I don't know my own strength."

My baby sister smiles at me. It's the same goofy grin she wore as a child. She looks the same. Except instead of a gap-toothed grin I spy her fangs.

I wait for the fear to arise. It doesn't come. Only the fraternal love I've had for my sister since I watched her take her first steps.

I pull Cari back to me. This time it's Cari who protests as I hug her tightly.

"You okay?" asks Marechal, rubbing me on the shoulder. "Rough day at work?"

"Yeah," I say, as I reach out to include her in the embrace.

"Didn't get everything checked off your list?" Marechal asks.

"No, I accomplished what I set out to do." I let my sisters go and scratch at the ache in my chest. "There were just... unintended consequences."

"Uh oh," says Cari, returning to Hadrian's lap. "You should know my brother does not like surprises. He likes things to go exactly as planned."

Hadrian smiles at his bride, looking at her like she was both the star he'd wished on and wished for. Only a couple of weeks ago, I had determined that Hadrian had an unhealthy obsession with my sister. I see it clearly tonight. That is the look of a man hopelessly in love.

"Anything we can help with?" asks Gaius as Marechal comes back beside him.

I chuckle at the offer. I'm not sure which would be the funnier ask. Should I tell Gaius about my intent to expose his kind to the world? Or should I regale him with my misstep of falling for one of his kind and then calling her a monster, thereby ensuring she will have nothing to do with me, ever?

"You're family now," Gaius is saying. "I know we're not the brothers you would've liked, but we're the brothers you've got, and we take care of our own."

He's right. This is my family now. A collection of munsters trying to fit into the world we all find ourselves in.

The theme song to the sitcom plays through the television set, signaling the end of the show. There is a knot in my stomach. A dull heaviness in my chest.

"Why don't you get some rest," says Gaius. "Whatever it is, we can talk about it tomorrow night."

He doesn't need to compel me to take that direction. I go to the guest room Gaius indicates. My eyes are closed

before my head hits the pillow. But even before my lids shut, all I can see is her face.

Deleting the video saved her and my family from a world that would struggle to accept them. But I have to face facts. Sanai's face will play on a loop in my mind for the rest of my life. If I don't find her and make things right, the color will drain from my world.

CHAPTER TWELVE

*S*anai

"YOU'RE STILL IN BED? It's nine at night. You're usually up by the first moonbeam."

I turn away from the moonlight that enters the room as Fay spreads the curtains. I'm not ready to greet this new night. I don't know when I'll be ready to greet any other night.

"You've already missed first meal. The Queen gave the eunuchs honeyed wine, and I have to say I like the sugary taste of the meal."

The thought of another male's blood makes my stomach churn. Fay thinks blood tinged with wine is sweet to the tongue. If she has a sip from a virile male she'll be incapacitated with one draw. A male high on the endorphins of sex would send her walking into the sunlight for a dust bath.

"What's gotten into you?" Fay sits on the edge of the bed. Her slight form barely causes a dip in the mattress.

Her question is a loaded one. Little does she know, something has definitely gotten into me. More like

someone.

I can still feel Arneis everywhere. On my tongue, between my thighs, and worse... in my heart.

"I'm just tired, Fayola. I think I'll rest for the day while you and the queen go to the Serranos meeting."

Staying in bed will also give me an excuse to not see the queen. Sooner or later she will hear of my dealings at Club Toxic last night. Will she cast me out? And for which transgression? Attempting to take the meeting with the Serranos? Exposing the supernatural world to humans? Or having a sexual encounter with a man?

Whatever punishment she metes out to me, I will take it. Even though I have already learned the error of my ways. Queen Malika was right to keep us from the vile creatures known as man. One had brought me to such heights of pleasure, only to dash me down into unimaginable pain.

I know now why the queen cuts off that appendage of any man who wants to remain in her presence. She had only been trying to protect herself and her daughters from men's treachery.

I wonder if the queen has ever had her own intimate encounters with men? If she had had a night like mine, she certainly wouldn't have cut off Arneis member. Though his words after the act had cut deep, the way he'd kissed my body and moved inside of me had been magic.

"Well, you're going to have to rally," Fay says, rising from the bed. "The queen mother is looking for you."

I let out a long and weary sigh. It's time to face the drums.

So, he'd done it. Part of me hadn't believed he truly would. That he would expose not just my fangs, but my body to the world. He'd put on display what we'd shared between us like it meant nothing. Likely because it hadn't meant anything to him.

I dress in a colorful bazin. The vibrant cloth is a trademark of my mother's people from the western part of

the African continent. I pull on the cowrie shell necklace that was an heirloom from Queen Amina, the warrior regent and my great, great grandmother. If I am going to be chastised or cast out, it will be with my head held high like my fearless ancestor.

When I walk into the room with the queen, I see that she is feeding. Queen Malika's braids fall forward, obscuring her face as her fangs sink into the neck of the man on his knees. The man's face is docile as she takes her meal. His hands are clasped in front of him in his lap, where his member would lay if he still had it attached.

But there is pleasure in his features. I know that a vampire's bite can be enjoyable to humans. However, I suspect the gratification on this man's features has more to do with serving his queen than sexual stimulation.

When I had bitten into Arneis's jugular, he had groaned with pleasure. I knew it was pleasure because I felt his cock pressing into me and spending.

Queen Malika unlatches from the blood servant's neck and the man sags. Am I imagining things, or did his eyes flutter? He keeps his eyes closed, his features going docile once more.

The queen dabs at her mouth with a cloth. "Good evening, hartlam. Have you eaten?"

Hartlam? Eaten? Where was the ire, the anger over what I'd cost the race of vampires the world over?

"You'll need to hurry," the queen says. "We're leaving in a quarter-hour."

"Leaving?"

So this is it. She's sending me back across the ocean. Even if I had wanted to search for Arneis, I won't be able to. I will truly never see him again.

"Yes," says the queen. "Our meeting with the Serranos is in an hour. There's an awful belief about the Africans who were stolen from the motherland and brought here. The notion is that they are always late to functions. They call it

CP time. I don't know what it stands for but it's such an erroneous way to think when my ancestors first broke the day into time periods using obelisks."

I ignore the history lesson and focus on the earlier words. "You want me to come with you to the Serranos meeting?"

"Yes, hartlam. I think you were right. It's time you take on more responsibilities."

My tongue is tied. I'm not busted. I haven't been exposed.

Here I am getting what I wanted after doing exactly what I wasn't supposed to be doing. And I am being rewarded for it. All I can think is not about how to extend our financial empire. All I can think is will I see Arneis at the Serranos?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*A*rneis

“PLEASE.”

The fabric of her colorful gown inches up her lithe thighs. Her caramel against my honeyed skin tones makes my mouth water. But nothing as much as watching the rope bind her legs.

“Please.”

I pull the rope tight. The twine pinches at her flesh, holding her tight. My fingers ache to hold her flesh in mine again.

“Hold still,” I hear myself say. “I want to remember every detail of this moment.”

I can’t see the deep pink of her intimate flesh as I move closer. But I remember every detail. Every taste. Every scent. Every quiver.

The sound of Sanai’s cries fills my ears until she cries out. Darkness still colors the screen on my phone as the camera’s eye presses against the massage table. Even though she has orgasmed, I haven’t had my feel. I lap at the nectar that seeps from her core. The sound of my tongue

against her flesh is the chorus to the whimpers of her voice.

It's over all too quickly. I press rewind and listen to the scene again. And then again, making sure to stop before the end when I became a monster to the precious creature who'd allowed me so close to her treasure.

I barely slept a wink all last night and into the day. My thoughts were consumed with Sanai.

My hand goes to my neck. It seeks her bite. The small puckers make my whole body sizzle with want when I touch them. It's a want that will never be filled because I will never see her again. Except in my mind and on this video. So I stay in bed and allow myself to get lost in her as the day goes by.

"Arneis, get up," calls Cari from the other side of the locked door.

My thumb scrambles to pause the video before Sanai can scream her orgasm again.

"We're making pancakes."

I sit up in the bed. I wasn't aware that vampires ate. My stomach grumbles reminding myself that I haven't eaten in over twenty-four hours. I throw water on my face. Then put on a clean shirt left by Gaius. The two of us are the same size, and with similar tastes in clothes. Though this garment likely costs the same amount as my annual salary as a public servant.

Making my way into the kitchens I see that a feast is laid out on the tables. My sisters are flipping flapjacks onto a serving plate. Gaius is sliding crepes onto a platter. Hadrian mixes up sangria in a glass pitcher.

I sit down and allow my older sister to fuss over me. Marechal fusses over all attended, as is her way. I am surprised that she is here and not back in her lab blending the latest grapes from the harvest. She worked impossible hours before. Much like I did. But here we are sitting down

for a family dinner, or first meal as it is called in this household.

I can't follow the train of conversation. Much of it has to do with Virius, the third Serrano brother who was recently taken hostage by a group of female shifters; women who had worked the harvest on the Durand vineyards for as long as I can remember.

No one at the table seems overly concerned with Virius's predicament. I was there the night he was taken. It had seemed to me that the male wanted to be kidnapped by the voluptuous leader of the jaguar shifters.

"We'll get this cleaned up before your guests get here," says Cari.

"Don't bother," says Hadrian, pulling her into his embrace. "We'll take care of it. You two enjoy your girl's night out."

"Cari and I are headed out for some shopping and girl time," says Marechal. "Do you want to come, Arnie?"

"To girl time? No, thank you."

Spending time with my sisters has always been a favorite pastime of mine. Except when they went shopping. I tended to frequent the same stores. When I did, I went in and got exactly what I wanted and headed out. Marechal and Cari had to try on different versions of the same clothing in various stores. All of which easily took hours.

Before they head out, my sisters both embrace me. Then they're taken back into the arms of their vampire lovers. I watch silently as Hadrian and Gaius fuss over them before reluctantly letting them climb into Cari's car.

"They have you two wrapped around their fingers," I say out loud.

"True," says Hadrian. "My heart beats for that woman."

"Marechal consumes my waking thoughts," says Gaius. "My sleeping ones, too."

Hadrian pulls out his phone. I can see he has a tracking app open. The bleeping dot moves down the street in front

of us.

Hadrian sees me staring and shrugs. "I'm open about my obsession with her."

For the first time since I've known the man, I crack a smile. These two truly love my sisters. They would never let anything bad happen to them. I have never felt as deeply as they do for any of my girlfriends.

I scratch at the back of my head. My hand grazes over one of the bumps of my neck, the one that pains me. Hadrian catches my movements.

"Domitia was cruel," he says. "We are not all like her. Many of us live in close-knit families and make our way through life together. But there are some who are power-hungry and sadistic. Like you would find in humanity."

I was coming to see that. My hand tracks over to my other bite. A different shudder runs through me.

"You have a second bite," says Hadrian. "Exactly where were you last night?"

I don't answer. Though I know that I will have to in order to get their help in finding Sanai. I'm just not sure where to begin.

"I got a bill from Club Toxic this evening," says Gaius. "It was for a private room. But I was here at home all night."

That's as good a place as any to begin. But before I can open my mouth, a car pulls up in the drive. It's not Cari's car. This is a luxurious town car with tinted windows.

I know who will step out of it before I see her. I'm already moving towards her. My heart beats kick up. My thoughts are consumed with her.

And then I see her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*S*anai

I LIKE this part of the desert state better. It brings to mind the rolling vineyards in northern Africa. Even though it's the dark of night, I can make out some vibrant colors in the wine country. The smell of Carignan berries tickles my nose. My tongue detects the sweetness of Marechal grapes nearby. The two scents together rouse my hunger, making me think of Arneis.

His blood had tasted of the sweetness I now smell. Had he been brought up in wine country? He'd said he was related to the Serranos. Those three brothers traded in wine. It's why the queen and I were going to see them. To expand the wine trade from our vineyards in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.

"You're different."

I turn to the Queen Mother. She is eyeing me with those shrewd eyes. I'm not sure what she sees? The fact that my sacred berry has been plucked?

"You seem more sedate. Perhaps even more mature."

I purse my lips instead of responding. I don't want her to know that the reason for my overnight growth spurt is a man. Or do I want her to know it? I loved everything that happened between Arneis and myself. Everything up until the end.

"When we go home, I'm giving you more responsibility."

Home? To an enclosed palace and eunuchs where I have to keep my legs closed and my mouth shut about the advancements in the world? Was that the life I wanted?

The answer is clear in my mind. It rings loudly in my ears. I can't go back. I want to stay here in this monochrome city where there lives a man with eyes the same color of the grapes in the vineyard outside the window.

"What if I stayed here?" I say. "It will be inconvenient to travel across the ocean each time we need to have a meeting or deal in a transaction."

"You expect me to throw one of my daughters to the wolves?" The corners of the queen's mouth turn down.

"Your daughter is a vampire and has your blood. A dog would heel under my command."

Queen Malika grins at this. Her chin lifts and her chest thrusts out as she regarded me.

I mirror her movements. I love this woman. I have looked up to her for so many years for all she's done for my people, for my family, and for me personally.

But I come to a realization then. One just as big as losing both my virginity and my heart to a man who hates my kind. Just like I am not the demoness who hurt Arneis, I am not my queen. And I do not want to be her.

I open my mouth to tell her this, but the car comes to a halt. I hear the crunch of tires underfoot. I feel the world stop around me. I smell him before I see him.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew it was a possibility that he might be here. His features had faltered when he'd called me a monster, as though he'd had trouble

making the falsehood stick in his mind. As he looks at me now, I know he doesn't see something from his nightmares.

Arneis walks out of the front door of the impressive house, a palace in its own right. He is flanked by two large males. But my gaze keeps coming back to him.

Shame colors his dark eyes. The purse of his lips begs me for my forgiveness. I give him my hand.

"Princess Sanai Amina Mohamud of the queendom of Orun. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Arneis takes my hand in his. He doesn't bow over it and kiss my knuckles as he should. Instead, he stares deeply into my eyes, trying to communicate a depth of feeling that only I can understand. Or so I think.

"What is the meaning of this?" asks the Queen.

"Your majesty." The other two men step forward. "Gaius Serrano at your service. This is my brother Hadrian."

Queen Malika waves away the other two vampires. "Why is there a human touching my daughter? Do you not have control over your servants?"

"Arneis is our brother," says Hadrian.

"He's also a leader in the human community," says Gaius. "You'll need his help if you intend to distribute your wine here."

The queen sneers. She never deals directly with humans, especially if said human is a man who is fully intact. If she even dares glance askance at Arneis's manhood, she'll have to regenerate her hand because I will have clawed it off.

She looks between me and Arneis, the regal scowl firmly in place. But in the end, she inclined her head, the highest of praise a human could hope to receive from her. With a swish of her skirts, Queen Malika steps past Arneis and me as we are welcomed into the Serrano home.

"Forgive me," Arneis says once we are alone. "For what I said to you. It's not what's in my heart."

"I'll forgive you if you'll forgive me for the bite."

"No," he says. "Never."

My heart sinks. I make to shrink away from him, but I can't. He's holding onto my hand. His grip tightens when I try to pull away.

"It was your bite that woke me up," he says. "It made me see the error of my ways. I thought I hated your kind. I thought vampires had stolen something for me. But I was wrong. Coming into this world has brought me to you."

A slow grin spreads across my face. He wants me. I can have him.

Arneis dips his head to mine, but before our lips can connect-

"Sanail "

I groan. Arneis presses his thumb to my lips. I kiss it, then knick it for good measure. His breath catches as I suck the drop of blood away.

That was just an appetizer. I plan to sink my claws into this man as soon as possible. For now, we walk slowly towards the open door.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Arneis

THE TALKS LAST AN HOUR. It's fifty-five minutes longer than I'd cared to speak. By the sixtieth minute, I raring to get my hands on the ties of Sanai's dress.

Today, she wears another vibrantly colored gown. Reds and blues and yellows crisscross her slender form in strategically placed strips. Just a few flicks of my fingers and I could have her hands bound over her head, leaving the rest of her free to slake my desires. I try to push my carnal thoughts aside and pay attention to the lecture at hand. But the only order I can focus on is how I will bring Sanai to pleasure after this talk is over.

As beautiful as she is, Sanai is just as brilliant. When it comes to the wine trade, she is knowledgeable and a slick negotiator. I concede on all of her demands. Not only because I have fallen in love with this woman. I concede because her business in Tucson will be a boon to the citizens here.

By the end of the negotiations, I've made a decision. I will be leaving public life. Tomorrow I will put away my

campaign signs and all of my dreams for higher office. I can't have my personal life scrutinized if I plan to spend the rest of my nights with a vampire.

"It's time for us to go," says Queen Malika.

The woman rises, but Sanai remains seated. "I'm staying."

"That was still up for discussion, child."

I find it fascinating that the queen calls Sanai a child even though the queen looks far younger. I am sure the monarch is centuries old. Maybe even millennia. Which brings me to wonder, exactly how old is the woman I want to hitch my life to?

"I'll find my own way from here, your majesty." Sanai's tone is firm, much like when we were negotiating the terms of distributing her queendom's wines here.

Something passes between the women. The queen looks between her daughter and me. I prepare to speak up, to let her know that I will protect Sanai with everything in me. But Sanai beats me to it.

"Don't worry, my queen. I have him wrapped around my finger. The queendom's interest will flourish here, you have my word."

After another long moment, Queen Malika gives a curt nod of her head. Sanai rises and rushes into her arms. The queen takes the embrace stiffly. But I see the crease of worry in her brow, much like I always get when my sisters are too long out of my sight.

When the queen is gone, I look up to note that Gaius and Hadrian have made their own exits. It's just me and the princess.

"Listen, Sanai. Let me explain--"

She is on me before I can get another word out. Sanai claims my mouth with her own, pressing the words into my lips. "Explain later. Love me now."

This meeting has finally taken the turn I was hoping for. "I move that we take this to the bedroom."

"I second that motion."

I tug Sanai to the bedroom I slept in the night before. Before I've even closed the door she's kicked off her shoes and is moving the straps of her dress down her body.

"No," I say. "Let me."

I didn't get to see her completely naked last night. We'd simply moved enough of our clothing out of the way to get at each other. Now, and for the rest of our lives, I plan to savor each second, each inch of flesh.

I slip the gown down Sanai's shoulders. The mounds of her breasts appear like summits I've worked hard to reach. I bend down and take the cocoa-dusted nipples into my mouth.

Sanai lets out a hungry moan at my tongue's first brush. I want to let her know that I'm going to feed her lust. I'm going to feed all of her appetites. But first, I need her to hold still.

With the gown at her midsection, I use the ropes to twin the fabric about her forearms. Sanai gasps, but she holds still for me. When I look up into her face, I see that her gaze is wide with want.

When I'm done, I take a step back from her. She stands where I left her. Her perky breasts sit high on her chest. Her elegant arms are bound to her stomach by the cords that had held up her dress. The bottom half of the dress is pooled at her feet, giving me access to the shadowed V between her thighs.

She presses her thighs together. I can hear the slickness gathered there. I can scent her readiness.

I peel off my clothing, not taking my eyes off her as I do so. "On the bed."

Sanai grins at my command and does as she's told and climbs onto the mattress.

"Spread your thighs."

Again, she follows my orders. With her knees set wide, I slide beneath her torso to reward her obedience. When my

tongue touches her sex, she throws her head back.

I latch my mouth around her sex, taking in the sweetness that's more vibrant than any grape I've harvested. Reaching my hands up, I steady her hips, locking her into place over me as I drink her down. Without the use of her arms to balance herself, Sanai is near to keeling over with the long laps I'm taking to her folds.

She rocks her hips against my tongue. Faster and faster, getting wetter and wetter with each gyration. Back and forth her hips go, round and round and side to side. She is dancing on my mouth. I spin my tongue around her clit, dipping in and out of her core until we are both dizzy.

When she comes down from her orgasm, I lift her hips and place her in my lap. Her slick core is greeted by my hard cock. As I slide inside of her I feel the aftershocks of her orgasm grabbing onto me for purchase.

Sanai opens pleasure drunk eyes to gaze up at me. Her hands are between our chests, her fingernails scraping against my heart. I catch her gaze as it slips to the side of my neck where the veins there pulse with eagerness. As though it is hungry for her bite.

"Do it," I say.

Her breath quickens. Her fingers curl. Her eyes flare wider. Then they narrow as she searches my gaze.

"I'm inside of you," I say. "I want you inside of me."

Her soft sigh makes my chest puff up with what I know is love. Her fingers brush the side of my mouth in a gentle caress that nearly breaks me. Her eyes soften and reflect back the love that has blossomed in my heart.

Sanai turns from the bite she gave me last night. Instead, she moves to the other side of my neck, where the first bite is. She kisses down my chin until she reaches the spot that has given me nightmares.

When her teeth strike that spot, my balls tighten. When her lips fastened to my flesh, I pull her hips flush against

me. When she pulls my life's essence from me, I release my seed into her.

Somewhere in the house, a clock chimes the new hour. Sanai and I have reached the end of this meeting's agenda. With both our bodies spent, there is no more business to conduct this night. With our hearts beating as one, our breaths in synch, and our limbs entwined, we close our eyes and declare the business between us adjourned... until our next regularly scheduled meeting. Which will take place tomorrow night, and then again the next night. For the rest of our lives.

HER VAMPIRE KNIGHT

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CHAPTER ONE

VIRIUS

I shiver as I run barefoot down the streets. My nostrils fill with the foul stench of refuse, both human and animal. But the smell makes my empty stomach grumble. It hasn't been filled in days. I don't let that stop me as I move through the carts and the people.

Pushing my body harder, I run down the footpaths. I leap taller than I am as I hop over a newly installed drainage ditch. Once, I would have marveled at the new age invention, but there is no time. I skirt a bridlepath, narrowly avoiding horse hooves.

Finally, I reach the door. The sounds of laughter barely mute the sound of squeals and grunts. I have only been alive for ten years, maybe less. No one paid me enough attention to keep track since my birth, and I hadn't learned my numbers until long after I'd learned to run. But even then I'd learned to keep my mouth shut. Any sums I kept, I kept in my head.

I stayed quiet with the butcher who cheated *Lena* Marcella. Neither truth nor a lie would have done me any good. Either a strapping would come from the butcher when the *lena's* back was turned, or the *lena* would lash me if the madame of the house thought I'd stolen from her. I knew I couldn't win, so I kept silent and simply dealt with whatever punishments came.

It was all I could do. Slaves had no rights, no say in their own lives, or what their masters and mistresses did with their flesh.

"No, sir. Please, wait."

The squealing maiden is playing coy. I know because of the breathlessness in her voice and the fact that she's not

running away from the large, out of shape male. His pockets are thick, and so she will stay and pretend to resist, as many of the rich men of Rome like. Others prefer for the women to seduce them so that they can deny their baser leanings and blame it on the *puellas* they've come to patronize.

This trick is especially used when the men come seeking out other males. Men enjoying the touch of others of their sex isn't so much as frowned upon in the streets of Rome as it is simply not discussed.

I pass by rooms where men pummel into women from behind. I peek into another where a woman has her head buried between a rich matron's thighs as the gray-haired, married woman trembles with delight. In another room, a man and a woman service a *praetor*. That particular magister runs his hands through the female *puella's* hair but his gaze is locked on the male's bare member.

I finally reach the scene I ran all the way for. A large male has a woman cornered in an empty room. There is no bed here upon which to do one's business. The customer is fully clothed, unlike the other patrons of the establishment. But the *puella's* back is bare. Her skin is blood red from the flailing of his instrument.

"Please," she begs.

Her voice isn't breathless in calculation or desire. She fights for breath with each word she is able to utter as the lash slices into her pale skin. The man digs his meaty paws into her blonde braids and yanks her head back.

"Please," she whimpers, barely audible as her neck strains and her wounds pulse.

There is no fight in her. She knows better. Though she doesn't want this, she has no choice. She is a slave. This man has paid for her time, to do with her as he wishes.

It isn't rape even though she says no. Slaves can't say no to the use of their bodies. The only person she could report this ill-use to is the madame. *Lena* Marcella would bother to

take the matter to court if her property was damaged beyond repair. Which may be why the brute Felix keeps his lashing to the slave's back and not the place where her thighs split. Bright dots of red blood stain his alabaster skin.

I'd heard that Felix the albino was coming to the brothel. The man's name, along with his unnaturally pale skin, strikes horror into the hearts of anyone who sees him. He has been in town for a month and everyone in the brothels know of his name, his features, and his proclivities.

The albino has never ventured this far from the center of town. Not many come to this brothel on the outskirts. Vera is the prettiest *meretrix* in the establishment. When I heard Felix was coming in this direction, I knew he would come straight to her.

With Vera's skin rent and her spirit broken, Felix finally undoes the folds of his toga. Vera whimpers, but she does not resist. I cannot stand by any longer; I launch myself into the room.

The albino is bigger than me. Stronger than me. With a weapon in his hand that is twice the length of me. But I can't allow him to keep up his assault. He doesn't even register when my fist hits his flesh.

"Virius, no," says Vera, with more strength in her voice than I thought possible. "Get out of here."

"No," I shout, launching another strike at the brute. "I'll save you, Mother."

My mother straightens on her elbows. Blood drips down her back as she does so. "Do not call me that," she hisses.

Vera's eyes glare into mine. We have the same face. The same mouth. The same eyes. But she doesn't claim me as hers. I'd often wondered if I came into her belly like this, by a man forcing his way into her. I later realized she likely didn't know who my father was as she'd been spreading her thighs for food and shelter since she was my age.

"Oh, look at that," trills a voice as gay as a bird's. "You have a valiant little knight."

I turn to the corner of the room. I hadn't noticed that there was a witness to Felix's brutality. A woman sits upon a cushioned chair.

Her beauty is beyond Vera's. She is something otherworldly. Her skin is pale, but not as translucent as Felix's. Her dark eyes tilt upward like a cat's. Her hair is long and white and hangs about her cherub-like face in a shimmering curtain. She smiles at me, and I am transfixed by her blood-red lips.

"He's nothing," says my mother, steel coming into her voice. "Send him away, and let's continue our fun."

But the woman's gaze is latched onto me. "A man who comes to a woman's rescue even though the odds are against him. Aren't you precious?"

"He does not need to beat her," I say. "She will lie with him willingly."

"But darling, it's the beating that will make her taste so sweet."

I know that sex is had not just with the parts between a person's legs but with the mouth as well. It was something else I cataloged away, as I knew this would be my life one day. Likely sooner rather than later, I would be filling my belly and keeping a roof over my head by lying on my back, bending over, and kneeling down. I was born a slave, the property of *Lena Marcella* to her most prized and highly paid *meretrix*.

"Don't worry about her, little one," says the white-haired woman. "She won't remember a thing when she wakes up. But you... I think I'll take you with me. I've never had a pet."

She beckons me to her. I have not been taught that I have any choices. So, I go to her.

"N-no, wait."

I'm shocked that any sound of protest comes from my mother. But I do not glance back at her. The white-haired woman's gaze holds me transfixed.

“How much?” she says.

The silence in the room is so loud that I can hear the soft inhale from my mother’s shock, and then her throat working as she swallows down any of the care she may have had for me as a child of her loins.

I do turn then, and I see my mother calculating. The blood on her back is ignored. The open wounds are forgotten. She names a sum.

“Done.” The white-haired woman turns my face back to hers. “Wait outside, darling knight.”

I look at my mother, but she isn’t looking at me any longer. Her eyes have glazed over in that look the *puellas* get when they have a particularly hard client to deal with. Felix goes back to his toga folds. He drops the flail and removes the instrument between his thighs. I see a flash of sharp teeth as he looks down at the blood on my mother’s back.

There’s a crack against my face. I have been slapped before. Never before have I seen stars behind my eyelids. I open my eyes to find the white-haired goddess looking down at me as though a demon lives behind her dark gaze.

“Outside, I said. You belong to me now, and I do not take any disobedience.”

I am shoved out the door on unsteady legs. When the door slams shut, all I hear are the sounds of a man grunting. Then I hear my mother scream.

My eyes snap awake as I go from the nightmare of my youth to the present day. Four hundred years later, and the pain is still raw in my chest. But it’s not my mother I see looking down at me in the corner. It’s not my sire who made my life a misery for two centuries.

In the corner sits a woman with fire in her eyes. She stares not at my dick, which has for centuries been the only thing of use on me to women. She stares at my mouth. I can’t tell if it’s because she wants to lick my fangs, or if she is contemplating ripping them out.

I am no longer a slave. I am no longer a boy. I could snap this woman's neck with little effort. But I'm curious to know what she desires of me. Because for the first time in my centuries of a half-life, the desire is returned.

CHAPTER TWO

ZAHARA

I stare at the beast's body as he stirs from his day's long sleep. He's not hairy like many of the four-legged prey I've hunted in the rainforests of Central America. But he is the biggest game I've taken down. Because Virius Serrano is a big male.

One of his arms is thrown over his forehead, holding back his thick blond curls. His other hand is flung out to the side, fingers flexing and curling as though lying in wait for a would-be attacker to come upon him. Little does he know he is already caught.

He walked into my trap just a half-day ago. In fact, he willingly offered himself up to me in exchange for his brother's life. I'd say it was an honorable move, but I know better. There is no honor in the still hearts of vampires.

My gaze remains transfixed on my quarry. Virius wears a t-shirt featuring the Sioux warrior Crazy Horse. On his strong thighs, he wears cowboy chaps over the jeans that are molded to his form.

I take my time as my gaze takes in his package. Not because I find his form pleasing. I find the whole get-up offensive. Cowboys and Indians, really?

My father's people are of the Tohono Oodoom tribe. My mother hails from the ancient Maya of Central America. It's not my indigenous tailfeathers that are ruffled. What flutters through my head like a butterfly flapping its wings on its nascent flight is how the man's chest fills out his shirt.

With each inhale, the hem of the t-shirt rises up higher and higher, giving me a view of the man's eight-pack. There is a tiny dusting of dark blond hair that extends from his

belly button and disappears down the waistband of his jeans. The bulge there is clear through the fabric.

I'm supposed to make a baby with him.

The thought makes me cross my legs where I sit on the edge of the cot. The thought and the sight of the bulge in his pants are overwhelming. Yes, Virius Serrano is a very, very big boy.

I wouldn't call myself petite. But beside this golden-haired lion, I might as well be a house cat. I have no idea how this will work.

Yes, of course I know how sex works. I grew up around animals. I read a couple of romance novels. And I have Wi-Fi on my cell phone, though the little screen doesn't allow as much detail as I would like.

I know the mechanics of the textbook, step by step instructions. But I haven't followed the steps yet, mainly because none of the boys I grew up with would dare come near my sacred womb—or rather, my magical pussy as I started calling it after reading romance novels.

I place my hand over my flat belly. In just a few days' time, a baby will begin to grow in there. A child with even more responsibility than me. My womb is the vessel to break a curse.

I thought I'd had a rough time, being part American Indian and part Indigenous Mayan. Being raised with the traditional values of my people while lending an ear to modern feminist values. Being a human female with an animal living inside of her.

My unborn son will exist between two worlds as well. But his existence will be in the middle of two supernatural worlds. My son will be part jaguar shifter and part vampire.

There has never been such a pairing. It is completely unfathomable. But it was prophesied, and that prophecy is due to come to fruition in just a few nights.

In just a few nights, I will have to take this big man into my body. Have him move inside me like I've seen animals do

in the field, pictures in textbooks, couples in movies.

I huff out an impatient breath. I've waited twenty-two years for this moment. All this build-up for nearly two decades. Then, in a matter of a couple of days, it will be over in a few moments, if the animals' couplings have taught me anything.

As though he could hear my thoughts, Virius jolts awake. His gaze immediately tracks to mine. Those honey-colored eyes hold me in place, leaving me in a situation I have never faced in my entire life. His gaze makes me feel as though I am the caught prey.

Which is ridiculous. He's my captive. He's about to bend to my will.

And then all I can think of is bending. Him bending me over and taking me from behind as I've seen it done in nature.

Virius's blond brow lifts. In amusement? In challenge? In acceptance?

I have the presence of mind to blush. Vampires can get into people's heads. Has he seen what I've been thinking about him?

His lips part. The top one, shaped in the bending curve of a heart, loosens from the lush bottom one. That bottom lip looks like the plumpest pillow I've ever seen. I want to lay my mouth against it—that is, until I see the bright gleam of fangs.

I shift on the cot, crouching into a fighting stance. A dagger is in my palm.

"I'm sorry," he says.

His voice is like the low grumble of a lion. I would have thought he was roaring at me before charging and taking me with those pointed teeth. The more shocking move is that I hold still.

Not because I want him to bite me, but because I've never before heard the words he's said; definitely not from a male.

“Did you just apologize?” I ask, not lowering my blade.

Virius takes a deep breath. He rubs his hands over his face, closing his eyes and leaning his head back. His jugular is exposed. He’s presenting the most sensitive part of himself to my blade as though he isn’t in the least afraid of me. When he pulls his hand away and straightens his head, the fangs are gone.

“I would never do anything to harm you, Zahara,” he says.

It’s the first time he’s said my name. The way he forms the Z makes it trill like a string pulled on a guitar. It hums through me, making me vibrate until it reaches the R in my name. That becomes a caress that pulsates all the way down to my fingertips and toes.

He holds me still once more with those eyes. They shine so brightly that I can see everything in him. Does the man not know how to shutter his gaze? The eyes are truly the window to the soul, and he has left the door wide open for me.

Or maybe it’s a trick. Maybe he’s trying to mesmerize me. I blink and look away. But I still feel drawn to him, wanting to look back up and seek the heat of his gaze.

“I’m sorry that I had to sleep,” he says. “The sun’s pull on me is too great. I fought as long as I could to stay awake and protect you.”

Protect me? “You do realize that you’re a captive here?”

He looks around the room as though it’s the first time he’s seeing it. The rumors about him all indicate that Virius... isn’t quite right in the head. Something about the vampire who turned him being a sadistic Dominatrix from the old world.

“I’m holding you captive,” I say slowly. “So, I don’t need your protection. You’re under mine.”

Virius grins at that. For a creature who is allergic to the sun, his smile would be that star’s greatest rival. “You are wee but mighty.”

He called me that the other day.

Wee.

Like he's some Scottish highlander and I'm his lass.

I know he was a Roman soldier who'd later gotten his kicks in the Spanish Inquisition by first torturing and then drinking the blood of prisoners. And now he is squatting on my family's ancestral land. But once I am with child, the gods will see fit to right that wrong the American government thought they could erase with paper and pen. Which means there is no time like the present to get down to business.

"Listen, here's the deal," I say. "I'm holding you here until the eclipse, which is in a couple of days."

Virius nods, but I get the feeling he's not listening. His gaze is on my lips. His golden gaze flitting up, down, and across as I form words.

Subconsciously, I wet them. The tip of my tongue sneaks out and curls over my top lip. At the move, his nostrils flare. Something inside me heats, making my next words easy to say.

"We're going to have sex then. On the night of the eclipse."

Virius blinks. Then he frowns. He had been leaning slightly forward, towards me. Now he leans back, as far away from me as he can get.

That doesn't seem right. I'm sure he's into me. Most guys are into me. If they're not from my tribe, they look at me like I'm some exotic, brown treat they want to go slumming with.

Not Virius. He looks horrified at the thought of getting busy with me. Maybe vampires are immune to the magic sparking between my thighs?

"It's not my idea," I hurry to say. My wounded pride is doing backflips to put some distance between us. "It's part of the prophecy."

The prophecy that will break the curse of the land and return its rightful ownership to my people. Not that I truly care about that.

I mean, of course I want to claim my birthright. But what I want more is to stay here in the States. Arizona has nothing on the beauty of Guatemala's rainforest. But the educational opportunities of these northerners are something that makes my mouth water.

"Is someone forcing you?" Virius asks, his voice going to a low register that warns of danger.

I like the way it rumbles through me. It coils and uncoils like a snake. The weight of it wraps around me, and something inside of me shivers.

"Because I will pull out his entrails through his arse and feed them to the bastard."

Well, that was certainly visual. At least I see that Virius's distaste has less to do with me than with the thought that I may be in danger.

"No," I say. "No one's forcing me. It's my destiny."

"Your destiny?"

"Yes."

Virius considers that. The hand he raked through his hair now scratches at the day's worth of stubble on his chin. "My answer is still no."

The dagger I forgot I was holding slips from my grasp. It clatters on the bed with a thud, resting between us. "No?" I ask.

"No," he confirms. "I will not have sex with you."

So, let me get this straight: I'm finally about to bag a guy who is not in my tribe, who doesn't look at my vagina like it's the holy grail, and he's telling me no?

Hunh?

Maybe I'm the one who is cursed.

CHAPTER THREE

VIRIUS

I've *known* many women over my life. Thousands upon thousands. Though I haven't seen many of their actual faces. My memories of the women I've fucked are all of their cunts and asses.

All those pussies were pink; only the shade differed. Each woman's pussy had two lips that split open as they grinned at my cock. Some lips were full and plump. Others were flat and saggy. Not all came with a pearl at the center. Some had been mutilated due to sacred rites of gods or legal rights of men.

None of these women cared to see my face. Each cunt came to me for one purpose only: to be filled and stretched by the monster that prowls between my thighs.

For nearly two centuries the beast below has lain in a quiet slumber, rarely stirring. I haven't been forced to fuck since Domitia walked into the sun. I do not seek pleasure with my hand, not having the desires that normal males do. And so, it slept.

Until just this moment. Until Zahara called to it with those pretty lips of hers.

For the first time in nearly two hundred years, the beast lifts its head. The massive twin sacks it rests between stir. A bead of interest forms, dripping from the single eye of the twisted creature hidden in my pants.

"I will not have sex with you," I say again.

My dick pulses, calling me a liar. It has always been the only part of my body that ignores the fact that I do not lie. It has fucked women time and again—against my will. All at the behest of the one who changed me into the blood-sucking whore that I am.

My mind was rarely interested in the cunts and asses and mouths open to my cock. My thoughts and needs were just as irrelevant to my cock as they were to Domitia. If Domitia presented me with the bared orifice of a paying client, my dick would get hard.

Most of the time. When my dick didn't rise to the occasion... Well, then Domitia had her ways.

I was her slave. She owned my body. It was at her command.

I got off easier than my brother Hadrian. Luckily, all our sire wanted of me was my dick. She'd ripped Hadrian's heart out—more than once.

"Are you saying you don't want to fuck me?"

I want to growl at the foul words coming out of Zahara's perfect mouth. Her lips are pink, a deep ruddy pink. There is a divot at the center of her top lip. A small pearl that I want to taste. My fangs sharpen, knowing that the flesh of her mouth is filled with her blood. At the same time, the blood I have in me rushes southward, answering the call of the beast.

"No, little one, I am not going to fuck you."

Once again, my dick calls me a liar. It throbs in my pants, ready to take a bite out of the zipper that encases it behind the harsh cloth. It wants to get at Zahara. To get inside her. The lush lips of her face would be a perfect place to break two centuries of celibacy.

The hell I'll ever let that monster out. I would die before letting it ravage her. I press the heel of my hand over the beast to leash it.

Zahara's gaze tracks my movement, her dark eyes opening wider as she sees the impression of my cock against the fabric. The outline of my dick can be traced down my thigh. My hand is not large enough to cover my entire length.

"You see now," I say. "You're too small."

Zahara's plump lips curl into what I think she means to be disgust. Her brows pinch together. Her nose crinkles. Her lips purse. Like everything about her, I find the movements fascinating.

"Puh-lease," she scoffs. "Every man thinks his prick is the biggest."

"I don't *think*, little one. It's a fact. I am massively endowed. I would easily split you wide open."

There are many women who like that. Women who wanted to be stretched so far that they tore as I pounded into them. I knew my dick had done its job when they couldn't walk for days, sometimes weeks, after fucking my cock.

"I won't let it hurt you," I say to Zahara.

"You do know that the female body is made to shove out something the size of a watermelon?"

A watermelon? I've never heard of such used in sex. I've borne witness to women mounting horses. One even tried to fuck an elephant—to a fatal conclusion.

I don't think that is Zahara's aim. She doesn't strike me as a masochist. Or a size-queen who aches for the stretch of an oversized phallus.

"I'm not the width of a gourd," I say. "Definitely the length, though."

She snorts at that. Her lips lift the tiniest fraction. Is that a smile? I'm not sure. I have never made a woman smile without my dick being put to use by her.

Just like her scowl, Zahara's grin is beautiful, breathtaking. I need to remember what I did to make it happen so I can do it again. We were talking about my cock, and her vagina, and pushing fruit out of it. The idea of her vagina as a piece of fruit is definitely appetizing, both to my mouth as well as my cock.

"Like it or not," she says, "we are going to have to fuck."

I still don't like the foul words coming from her sweet mouth. But my dick does. It punches at the front of my

pants again.

"It's the only way to break the curse," she says. "The only way to get our land back."

"Your land?"

"The Serrano vineyard is on sacred Tohono O'odham land." Zahara's gaze turns fierce. I see a fleeting image of the warriors of her past cross her features.

"Oh? Is that all?" I say. "Take whatever land in the vineyard you like. There's plenty of room."

The smile she wears slips. When it comes back, it's clearly forced. "You don't understand how ownership works, do you?"

"My mother sold me to a demon when I was just a boy." I shrug; the words tumble from my mouth easily for the facts that they are. "I was born a slave. I've always been someone's property."

Her forced smile falls under the weight of my words. The sharp end of the blade she's holding points down. Zahara looks at me, horror-struck.

"Oh, I don't blame her. It wasn't as though she loved me. Maternal love is a fairly new human concept. Most animals pop out their offspring and leave them to fend for themselves. My mother did feed and clothe me for a few years, at least."

Zahara only stares at me. She doesn't smile. I don't know the words to say to bring back that grin. It seems inappropriate to bring up my dick and her vagina after talking about my mother.

I'm not sure. I wish Gaius was here to advise me. Though he was born lowly like me, his manners are perfect. I never bothered with the niceties of table manners and polite speech. No one ever wanted anything from me north of my cock.

What I do like is having Zahara's attention fully focused on me. Her dark gaze roams with a bright light of

compassion. But then she blinks, as though catching herself. She closes her eyes and looks away.

"Are you hurt?" I reach out to her.

She moves back. The pointy end of the blade is pointed once again at my heart. Doesn't she know it's her frown that cuts me more than that edge ever could?

"You're trying to get in my head, aren't you? Trying to make me feel sympathy for you so that I'll let you go."

"Do you mean mind control?"

The fact that she's now glaring at my ear instead of directly into my eyes tells me the answer.

"I don't have that talent," I assure her. "Compelling takes a lot of focus. My mind wanders a lot. I was likely dropped on my head as a baby."

Her glare leaves my ear and returns to my eyes. I wish I could hold her there. Having her eyes on mine makes me feel clearheaded for the first time in my life.

"I can hardly look at myself in the mirror," I say. "But I can't seem to take my eyes off you."

The corner of Zahara's right eye twitches, as though she's trying to determine whether to believe me or not. I hold still for her examination. I've never been to school or had any formal learning, other than Hadrian insisting I learn my letters. Whatever test Zahara gives me now, I am determined to pass.

"I don't lie. Not with my words, anyway." I look down at the growing bulge in my pants.

Zahara's gaze dips too. "Looks like your body knows what it wants."

I shake my head. "Both me and my dick desire you. But like I said, I won't let it hurt you."

"You talk about your penis as though it's not a part of you."

"It has a mind of its own. Believe me when I tell you it's too big for you. Would you like to see for yourself?"

I reach for my zipper and peel it down. As I do so, the blade falls from Zahara's hand and she gasps. With feline grace, she springs from the bed and lands on the floor as the monster makes its appearance from between the teeth of my zipper.

CHAPTER FOUR

ZAHARA

I've spent most of my life living in Central America. In that land of lush green forests and wetlands, there are many large animals that can kill you, one of them being the Anaconda. I've seen my fair share of the large snakes slithering around, looking for a meal. None of those beasts could hold a twig to the massive tree trunk that Virius Serrano takes out of his pants.

I leap back, away from him and to the door. The hackles of the big cat in me rise, now on high alert as I sense a threat.

I hiss at the sight of the predator as it slithers towards me. There is no tongue that slithers out of its mouth. Only a single bead of moisture that leaks from its solitary eye. I swear that eye tracks me as more of the beast's body slithers from its hiding space between Virius's thighs.

Is he carrying that thing around with him the whole time? How does he stay upright? How has it not attacked him? If it gets close enough, it will certainly swallow me whole—from the tip of my head on down to my pinky toes.

Virius's cock is thick enough to take me whole. He's definitely long enough to have his fill of me. And that thing is supposed to go inside me?

I sincerely don't see that happening. It defies the laws of biology. It defies the laws of physics.

"It won't hurt you," Virius says as he holds the massive beast out towards me. He can barely contain his cock in his hands, and his hands are nearly the size of my head.

The pulsing of that one-eyed monster begs to differ with his words. It throbs as it looks at me. The red tip grows darker with each second as blood pools there. The veins at

the sides of the python's length also coil and writhe as he grows longer. Thicker. Closer. Ready to eat me alive.

So why do I want to reach out and touch it? Why do I have the urge to pet it and give it a name? Peter the Python. Anthony the Anaconda. Lenard the Lady Killer. Frankie the Fucking Big Dick Monster.

"Now you see why I won't have sex with you," Virius says.

He shoves his dick back into his pants. It's a two hand job. The large, reddened flesh definitely fights him as he wrestles it back below his waistband.

It does not go. He heaves a sigh of frustration as he gives up the battle with his zipper. Instead of continuing the wrestling bout, Virius yanks the threadbare sheet over his waist.

I can still see the clear outline beneath the cloth. Frankie pulses with life. Still writhing, coiling, and pulsing. I would swear it's trying to get closer to me.

Anacondas aren't as dangerous as Hollywood movies and documentaries make them out to be. Snakes, large or small, aren't aggressive creatures. They generally go out of their way to avoid large animals, especially humans. If they attack, it's because they feel threatened. Or they're hungry.

The thing in Virius's pants continues to move, tenting the sheets, as he stretches his hands behind his head and grins up at me.

"You are small and tiny, just a wee thing. Your cunny would split in two if the beast got too close."

Said cunny pulses and clenches as I continue to stare at his covered midsection. Then my mind replays his words and my lady bits' desires get pushed to the back of my thoughts. "Did you just call me small? Tiny? And wee?"

I straighten from my crouch to my full height. So maybe I'm nowhere near the six and a half feet of Virius's height. I'm barely at his eye level as he lounges back on the cot.

Taking a few steps toward him, I retrieve my dagger. I flip it in my palm, catching the handle and aiming the pointy end at him. Virius grins at my show of violence.

"And fierce." He grins down at the dagger in my hand. "You would gut me if I let you."

If he let me? Does he not see who has the upper hand here? Clearly, in my upper hand is a blade that I just demonstrated I know how to use. Like I said, he isn't the first Anaconda I've ever seen.

"You are a treasure," Virius says.

That rankles. I've been told all my life that I am special. That my womb is sacred. Its purpose is to free my people and bring us wealth and happiness. And for that belief, I—along with my magical, virgin vagina—am a treasure.

But at the way Virius says the word *treasure*, I don't feel burdened by another's desires of me. His gaze asks nothing of me. He looks at me with delight. With amusement. Like he wants to play with me.

The boys I grew up with never wanted to play with me. The girls, either. Treasures are coveted, looked at, not handled in fun.

The blade in my hold falters at my thought of having a little enjoyment. Not out of duty or a sacred rite—which by the way were never any laughs. I've never enjoyed blowing off steam for no good reason.

"What can I do to please you?"

I blink my eyes a few times to bring Virius back into focus. My mind must have drifted. Did he just ask me what I want?

"I'm not giving you my cock." He ticks off that item with his thumb, and said thumb is just as blunt as said cock. His long index finger joins his thumb as he continues his list. "You don't want me to give you my land. Tell me what I can do to bring you pleasure."

His words make no sense. It has to be some kind of trick. He's trying to make a ploy to escape. "You're trapped. You

know that, right?"

Virius looks around the cave he walked into last night as though seeing it for the first time. The rocky walls are a smooth, slate gray. The cot and threadbare sheets are the only furnishings in the room. Behind me is a locked door that opens from the outside.

"Do you wish me to stay?" he asks.

"You kinda have no choice. Trapped, remember?"

Virius nods as though turning my words over in his head. Decision apparently made, he nods. "Then I'll stay."

I give my head a shake. I'd heard he isn't playing with a full deck up there. But now I see that the rumors are true. This man might be crazy.

"Would you like me to pet you?" Virius says. "Cats like to be scratched behind their ears and on their bellies."

One: I'm not some house cat. I'm a jaguar—a panther, actually, because my coat is midnight black and I have no spots. Two: he must not have come into contact with any kind of domestic cat before because not a single feline would let a hand anywhere near its belly without sinking in claws or teeth.

"Or having your tail stroked. Would you like me to do that?"

"No, I—ah."

With cat-like reflexes, Virius snakes his hand out and grabs me. My hand opens in protest. When it does, my knife clatters to the floor.

I'm not defenseless. I've been trained to take down assailants. Though I don't feel under attack by his hands.

Virius brings me to him, picking me up as though I weigh nothing and sitting me on his lap like I am some damn house cat. His lap is still covered by the sheet, but it's not much of a barrier for what he's packing. Before I can yowl in protest, his hands are on me.

To my utter shock and embarrassment, I let out a low purr as his long, thick fingers find a spot behind my ear and

he rubs me there. Somehow, he knows the right pressure.

His fingers have me shuddering, mewling as he hits the right spots. I am ready to curl into him and rub myself against him. I am knife-less, defenseless, and ready to show him my belly as long as he keeps scratching at that particular itch that I never knew I had.

CHAPTER FIVE

VIRIUS

Zahara trembles at my touch. My little cat is a small, wee thing. Whereas I am a monster, a blunt object used to smash and stuff into small things that like to be broken.

For a moment, fear grips me hard. Have I hurt her? It's always been difficult for me to tell the difference between pleasure and pain. Women's cries of passion as their flesh bleeds from my pounding sound the same as a prisoners' screams as I ripped off their fingernails.

I know my strength. What I don't know is how to be gentle with all the power I wield in this overlarge body of mine. Tenderness has never once been requested of me.

Not when I fought for every scrap on the streets of ancient Rome. Not when I whored for Domitia. Not when I was an executioner for Inquisitors.

My little cat purrs as she shudders. That is a good sign. That is a sign of pleasure.

Animals, I have always understood. The sounds they make to showcase their intentions are clear. A low growl as a warning. A high-pitched rumble as an invitation.

Zahara's sigh rolls off her tongue. The sound, beginning from high in her nasal cavity, reminds me of the coiffed singers in the theater that Gaius liked. Those women always sounded to me as though they were screaming along with the music. The sound that comes from Zahara is like that, but pleasant to my ears.

As my fingers continue to stroke her, she hits a higher note. And then an even higher one. Her eyes are closed, but I still see her lashes flutter. Another sign of pleasure. My

chest puffs out at the thought that I have brought her this satisfaction.

I run my nails behind her ears. Her lobes are shaped like teardrops, reminding me of individual grapes hanging from the vine. I let my fingers follow the curve of her ear.

She shudders again. Her small breasts rub against my shirt. I have the urge to rip away the fabric between us and feel her flesh against mine. I look at the handfuls on her chest. What would it be like to cup them in my hands? What would it be like to taste them with my tongue?

I banish the thought before it can take more shape. Women have only ever wanted me to squeeze their breasts until they reddened. To punish their nipples with a vice formed by my blunt fingers until they screamed from an orgasm. Even if Zahara wanted that treatment, I don't think I could give it to her. Seeing even the slightest red mark from my hand on her dark skin would gut me.

Gentleness is still a new thing for me. It's a skill I'll need to master before allowing any more contact than this. I'll need to ask Gaius for guidance. He is a master of women's pleasure. Giving it. Withholding it. Prolonging it.

Hadrian, on the other hand, likes to tie up his vampire wife, Carignan. But from her screams, which are filled with declarations of love for him, I gather she likes it.

I don't want to hold Zahara down. I know what it is like to be bound and forced against your will until you have no will left. No, I want her to seek me out for pleasure. Just like a cat would curl up in its master's lap.

Just as she's doing now as I stroke her.

The sound of her purring makes the beast grow harder. It throbs and pulses, eager to get at her. The head of my cock rubs away at the thin sheet separating us. It's blunt but it could punch a hole in the cotton with the right amount of friction.

I need to put it away. To jam it back inside my pants, which are now too small. Though I know it's a fool's errand.

The monster has reared its head. It won't go down without a fight. I don't have much fight in me with heaven in my arms.

Zahara is pressing her face into the palm of my hand. She rubs her cheek against my fingers, as though she's seeking more of my touch. The sensation is so foreign to me that I stop petting to watch her now pet me.

From a distance, the angles of her heart-shaped face had appeared sharp. Now that I'm holding her cheekbones, I feel the softness of the flesh there. There are fine hairs along her temples that tickle my fingertips. I stare at them in wonder as her softness, her heat, her nearness, invade all of my senses.

Does she realize that I am now wrapped around her little finger? Does she understand that my entire world view has narrowed down to encompass only her? Does she know that I have her scent, and will follow her wherever she goes until the end of time?

She says she's trapped me. She is entirely right. My cage is here inside the palm of her hand, and I will never leave willingly. If she wants to keep me underground in this room, in this bed, I will gladly stay.

I am so hyper-aware of all the new sensations that I miss the invasion. An unfamiliar sensation presses against my mouth. It's Zahara. She rubs her lips against mine—once, twice. And then she presses forward. I jerk away from her before she can...

I'm not sure what she had planned.

Zahara's eyes slam open. She gulps and looks around as though she's forgotten where she is. Her brown cheeks are stained red. But it's a darker shade of red than passion. She looks embarrassed.

"What did you just do?" I ask her.

"Me? I didn't do anything. You're the one who got all handsy."

She swats at my hands. I do not loosen my hold on her, though I am mindful of my strength. I only exert enough power to keep her in my lap, pressed against my chest so that she cannot escape.

“With your mouth?” I say. “What was that?”

“Don’t get all excited that I kissed you. It didn’t mean anything. I was just sampling the milk, since I’ve already bought the cow.”

Zahara continues to push and shove at my chest. She turns her head away, avoiding my questioning gaze.

“That was a kiss?”

Her face reddens. She manages to get an elbow free and uses it to deliver an uppercut. I merely grunt and tighten my hold. She is strong for a little thing. But she doesn’t realize she is mine and I will not let her go.

“No one’s ever done that to me before,” I say.

Zahara stops struggling. She turns back to me, her lips parted in a perfect O.

I gaze at the shape. My eyes do a full circuit of her upper and lower lips, remembering their softness. I knew what a kiss was, though it was rare to see in a whorehouse. Patrons came to have their loins plundered, not their lips.

“Do it again,” I say. Then, remembering my manners, I add, “Please.”

Zahara’s breathing is heavy. But she’s stopped struggling. Something else that has stopped throbbing is the beast below. It appears just as entranced by the kiss as the rest of me.

I taste the sweetness of her breath as she exhales once more. My tongue aches to trace her lips. My belly aches to drink her down. Not her blood—though I wouldn’t mind a taste of that, as well. But right now, I just want her. Her breath mixed with mine. Her essence inside of me.

Barely a couple of inches separate us. Zahara’s lips are right there for the taking. I hunger for her mouth, but I don’t want to do it wrong.

“Show me how?” I say. And then I remember, belatedly, “Please.”

She swallows, and I want to growl in protest. I wanted to taste that.

One of my hands releases the hold I have on her face. My fingers slide down her body to rest on her hip, to hold her steady and not let her go.

“Please,” I repeat. It’s the last time I’ll ask. Then I’m going to take.

“Sure,” she says. Though she fails at the nonchalance I think she’s aiming for. “Why not? We’ll be fucking soon anyway.”

I don’t correct her. I was being truthful when I said I wouldn’t have sex with her. Down below, the monster in my pants calls me a liar. He’s only patient now because he wants to taste her as much as the rest of me does.

Zahara leans in. I try to wait, to be patient, to follow her lead. But then, like the brute I was raised to be, I strike.

CHAPTER SIX

ZAHARA

*T*he man is lying. He has to be lying. I'm not buying that a four-hundred-year-old vampire has not kissed a woman in all his unnatural life. But I don't care if it is all a lie, a bit of a Roman-tic game to loosen me up, because hell, can the lying fiend kiss.

He made it seem like he didn't know what he was doing when I first brushed my lips to his. Now that he is brushing his lips against mine, it is clear he knows exactly what he wants. And what he wants is me.

If I hadn't known that from Frankie still stirring beneath me, like lightning was striking volts into his balls, then I would know it by the way Virius growled low and deep in the back of his throat at the second brush of our lips.

At first, I was the only one out in the storm. Now, Virius is with me every step of the way. Using his lower lip, he tests the touch of my top lip. Moving his head back and forth in a slow, sensuous motion, he covers every part of my mouth, from the corner, to the seam, to the divot at the center.

I feel devoured by this man, and he isn't even using any tongue. Not that I've had anyone tongue kiss me before. Unless he's lying to me, this is the first kiss for both of us.

The more Virius's mouth moves against mine, the more I begin to believe him. Not because of his inexperience. Because of how he revels in the experience.

It's the same way that I am getting caught up in the unfamiliar contact. We both take our time exploring. There is no rush to get to a particular part because it's all new territory. From the way he pulls me closer with each stroke,

and the way I come to him without protest, I gather we both are thoroughly enjoying this brave new world.

The moment Virius's tongue sneaks from his mouth and into mine, I lose control. His licks are not tentative flicks. He's a man trying a new dessert, as though he knows he will clean the plate and order a second serving.

He licks at me in long, silky strokes. Then his tongue disappears into his mouth to savor what he's captured. After another of those low growls, he licks again. And then again.

Virius bites at my bottom lip, tentatively, as though he thinks he might hurt me. I should be worried that he'll bite me. That is his natural instinct. But he only nibbles softly, as though I am an appetizer. When my lips part, he starts in on the main course.

He licks into my mouth like I am a rare steak. His tongue sweeps over me, devouring me. I meet his tongue finally. The first flick of my tongue catches the sharp side of one of his fangs.

I feel the tiny pinprick like a needle. Then there's the metallic taste of blood. Virius's tongue circles around mine. He snatches the droplet away and then sucks. Hard.

I should be afraid. A vampire has tasted my blood. But the feel of him pulling from me, the knowledge that he is swallowing a piece of me down, it turns me all the way on.

I squirm in his lap, needing to feel the same kind of friction between my thighs. Frankie coils beneath me, ready and eager to slither his way into my depths.

Virius's hold on me tightens. His hands lock me down so I can't wriggle away. Not that I'm trying to escape.

The anaconda between his thighs slithers higher and throbs at my core. It pokes at the bud at the apex of my thighs. Like Eve, I want the snake to take a bite.

Somewhere in the room, a throat clears behind us. I wonder if it's the voice of God. Is he looking down from on

high and showing his displeasure at the sin about to go down beneath the garden on the surface?

I don't have the chance to look up to see if it's the Heavenly Father. I'm being thrown onto the bed. Virius puts himself between me and the throat-clearer. His large body blocks me from seeing who has come into the locked room. The menace that runs off him should scare me, but it turns me on.

I've had men protect me before. But each one had done it for his own gain. I know without a doubt that Virius is sticking his neck out for me because he wants to please me.

If I were a weaker woman, I'd reach up and twirl my hair. I'd swoon back on the bed and let him fight this battle for me. Unfortunately, that's not the woman I was raised to be. That level of inaction isn't how I was taught to move through the world.

I look over to see Itzel standing in the doorway. My aunt is no match for this vampire. But like the fierce warrior she is, she holds her ground, teeth bared and dagger in hand.

When I try to move around Virius, he puts out a meaty paw, holding me back. Does he still not realize who is the captor and who is the captive here?

"Down, boy," I say. I get off the cot and move around him. "This is Itzel."

"She's your kin?" asks Virius.

Technically, she's not my blood. Both my parents are dead. I have no direct relatives left. But I do claim the women of this tribe as my family. So, I nod to Virius.

And just like that, the menace rolls away from his large body. His entire being changes from one of destruction to a teddy bear—a soft grizzly of a teddy bear with sharp claws and deadly fangs.

I want to cuddle into him.

I am so fucked in the head.

"My apologies," he says. "That's probably not the impression I should make if I want to impress your family."

Itzel isn't looking at his face. Her gaze is below his belt, because he isn't wearing a belt, and he never refastened his pants. They are down around his ankles. Frankie stands as erect as a flag pole. His one eye salutes Itzel.

The older woman clears her throat before she jerks her gaze away. "You're needed, Zahara."

It takes me a moment to tear my gaze away from Frankie. The little monster certainly knows how to get attention. I walk to the door.

When Virius starts to follow, pants still around his ankles, I hold up my hand. "No, you stay here."

He frowns at me.

"You're my captive, remember?"

The frown doesn't leave his handsome face. Nor does he make a move to pull up his pants.

"Go back to the bed, or I'll have to bring out the chains."

"You like bondage?"

I realize he's asking a legitimate question. Not a hint of kink-shaming.

"I'll be back later," I say, avoiding his question and, more importantly, avoiding my piqued interest in the subject matter.

Virius bends, giving me a delectable view of his ass. It's just as nice as the front package. When he straightens, I see that he has a dagger pointed at me. My dagger.

"Here," he says, handing it to me.

I want to tell him that no one here will hurt me. Instead, I say nothing. I'm gratified that Itzel didn't see that I had dropped not only my guard against my prisoner, but also my weapon.

Virius toes off his pants, then he kicks them into a corner of the cave. With one final glance over my shoulder, I see him go and sit on the bed, lounging as a panther would. I tear my gaze from him and follow Itzel down the narrow passageway.

“What do you think you’re doing, playing with that demon like that?” she demands once we are out of the vampire’s earshot. “Remember your role, Zahara. Remember your purpose.”

As if I could forget. It’s been drilled into my head since before I could form words. As I open my mouth to speak, I see shadows moving from the wall, some in feline form, others on human legs. They all converge on me, gazes flashing, shining the bright light of sacred responsibility directly into my eyes.

“I know,” I say. “My womb will birth the child to save our land and our kind.”

“Don’t forget the other part,” says Itzel. “The prophecy says he’ll die before the child is born. So don’t get attached.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

VIRIUS

I can't keep my fingers off my lips. They still tingle from where I pressed them to Zahara's. They feel swollen, like I've been punched in the mouth. I've been hit in the face many times; the majority of blows came when I was still human.

If it wasn't my mother, or the *lena*, or one of the *puellas* of the brothel knocking me out of their way, then it was someone on the street throwing into me. As a human, I had to fight for every breath I took, every scrap of food I stole, every tendril of warmth I could scrounge. By the time Domitia turned me, I'd given up the fight.

I was scrawny and helpless as a child. I grew overlarge and stout when I came into my manhood. As a vampire, I had the power to take whatever I wanted. But by then there was nothing that I craved.

It was what Gaius called irony. Something or other to do with opposites that are funny. I laugh now as I run my fingers over my swollen lips. It was a wee cat who had taken a swing at me and landed me on my ass.

I settle down on the uncomfortable cot. I slept on cobblestones as a boy. For centuries, I've had the luxury of feathers and down and memory foam beneath me. I don't want to get used to the rickets of this poor excuse for a bed. Tomorrow, I'll take Zahara back to the house and wrap her in silks.

Though, she is a cat. She might prefer feathers.

I lick my lips at the thought of her covered in feathers. The taste of her is still in the corner of my mouth. There's even a hint of her blood on my tongue.

She is O-positive; the most common blood type on the planet. On any other day, I would pass on that type. I always find it bitter and flat at the same time.

Not so when it comes from Zahara's veins. With just the drop of her lifeblood, I have a rush of sensation to my head. My teeth ache at the sweetness of it. My hunger grumbles for some more of it. I know from this moment on, from this taste, I will never drink anything else.

Zahara wants me to lie with her, to fuck her? Oh, irony is having its fun with me today. That will not happen. Though the beast below begs to differ, I will keep my monster cock from her.

I will be happy to kiss her senseless for the rest of her life. I will spend my nights scratching and petting her. Then I'll sip my fill from her lips. And later, when she allows it, I'll tap one of her veins for my sustenance.

I close my eyes to wait for her return. In the silence of the cave, I hear her voice. She's far away from the hovel she's left me in. But I sense her distress. She feels cornered, trapped.

My feet are on the floor before I have any conscious thought of moving. The closed and locked door isn't even a thought. When it meets the thrust of my shoulder, it learns it was never an obstacle. Not if it stands between me and her.

The voices are still faint, but they aren't my guide. Zahara's scent is. I can smell the agitation in it and that makes me move faster. I have to remind myself that she has a dagger. I saw her wield it the other day against males of her kind.

My little kitten can hold her own in a fight. It made my cock stir to watch her take the larger males down. And then she turned that dagger on me. My heart had never beaten so wildly in my life.

It thuds hard in my chest as I run to find her. The thuds ring in my ears because my blood supply is low. I haven't

eaten for nearly two days. But my blood lust will have to wait until I make sure that Zahara is safe.

When I round a corner, I see her. She's surrounded. But not by male shifters. She's surrounded by women. All of them older. All of them with the smell of fur.

Zahara has her back to a corner as the women close in around her. Not a single fist is raised. Only voices. It looks like they're all in the middle of an argument.

"Why should she wait?" says a woman who could only be described as a cougar. Her face is wizened with age, but her body is as supple as a coed's. "She might as well fuck him now and be done with it."

"It has to be done on a full moon, in accordance with the prophecy," says Itzel, the woman who came to fetch Zahara earlier.

"This is biology," says the cougar, "not magic. She is fertile now."

The arguing continues from both sides of the alcove. The only one not joining in is Zahara. She looks away from the shouting, as though she isn't hearing any of it. The faraway look in her gaze reminds me of myself, of all the times I was chained to a wall or strapped down to a bed so that a rich, upper-class woman could use my body to fill Domitia's coin purse or garner a favor.

I never needed to be strapped down. The chain hasn't been made that could hold me. The binds were an illusion for the human women who purchased my service. The reason I didn't fight was a whole other game that my mistress liked to play.

Domitia was known for her power plays. She'd had me mindfucked ever since I was a child. I always bent to her will. She got off on seeing the physical manifestation of my compliance.

Is that why Zahara is standing there in the middle of this argument? Has she been mindfucked by one or all of these

women? They're talking about a prophecy. Didn't she say something to me about a prophecy?

I take a step towards her, ready to bulldoze my way through all of them to get to her. That's when I feel the dagger at my throat.

I only barely stop myself from taking the head of the person who threatens my life. Any other time during the last two centuries, I might not have cared that my life might end. It had all been a misery. But tonight I have known happiness, and I want another taste of it. I want another taste of Zahara.

Therefore, I can't kill the woman behind me. She smells like Zahara. She must be kin. I don't think Zahara would like it if I decapitated her aunt or cousin.

"Go back the way you came," a feminine voice whispers into my ear. "Follow the passage and take the tunnel to the right. It will take you back to the surface."

"The surface?"

"You are trying to leave, aren't you? You are trying to escape?"

Why would I leave? This is where Zahara is. When I don't answer her immediately, she gives an irritated sigh.

"We'd heard you weren't right in the head."

That is what's whispered about me. It's likely true, though Gaius and Hadrian get pissed any time anyone dares to say it aloud. Which is why people never dare raise their voice above a whisper if they even dare to say it.

"You know what they're going to do to you?" the woman continues. "They're going to breed you. They're going to use your sperm to make a child. And then they'll—"

"Drop the knife, Pia."

I turn at the sound of Zahara's voice. She still has her back against the wall. But even from this distance, I can see the tension in her limbs. She's poised to pounce, like a jaguar scenting its prey.

Her gaze flashes a bright yellow. Her skin bristles, like it's not flesh, but fur. Her white teeth flash and I catch a bit of fang. It causes the beast below to stir with desire for her.

"He's trying to escape," says Pia.

And then there are more daggers, fangs, and fur. But when I look up, all I see is Zahara. There is a flash of hurt in her dark eyes before her features turn to steel.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“*I* just want to make sure you understand what’s at stake here, child,” Itzel says, bringing my attention back to the lecture at hand.

I had drifted off as the voices of the women rose up from both sides of me. Those standing on the right with Itzel are the purists. They believe that I should follow the letter of the prophecy and wait to give up the goods at the appointed time, which is the full moon in two nights’ time.

Those prowling on the left are led by Zuma, who isn’t a jaguar. She was originally from my father’s tribe but moved down to Guatemala a generation ago. Though she is a cougar, the jaguar shifters accept her. What isn’t so acceptable is her disregard for the old ways of the Maya.

“I just want to make sure she knows she can use his stake for a little fun before she has to get down to business,” says Zuma, giving me a wink.

I don’t return the cheeky gesture. I purse my lips and let the air out through my nose. For all of my life, others have made decisions for me based on my destiny. I am supposed to birth a child to save our tribe. Yet even after I reached my maturity, everyone continued treating me like a child. If I mouthed off, I’d be treated as a child. If I held quiet, I’d be treated as a child.

I’d thought that when I got rid of the males, things would change. The women trust me, but I’m still the youngest of the group. And so I’m still treated as a child.

“It is her destiny to release us from the curse,” says Itzel.

“I know,” says Zuma. “But that doesn’t mean she has to act like a sacrifice.”

Oh, the irony. The women in our history were given as sacrifices to gods. But they also ruled. There were times of harmony before colonialism brought in the patriarchy and destroyed our matrilineal history.

I tune them out again and let them lecture on. I've only ever wanted a lecture from an actual college professor. I want to sit in a lecture hall on an uncomfortable hardback chair and scribble down notes with different colored pens. But nope. I'm going to be changing the diapers of a supernatural baby instead.

I know there are thousands of women who go to school and raise a family at the same time. I even pointed out that I will have a literal village of women to help me raise my child. But that didn't sway them either. I'll still be barefoot and pregnant.

Well, not barefoot. Zuma did gift me with a nice pair of heels last month. Not that I'll get to wear them anywhere except, maybe, the delivery room.

Thoughts of the delivery room take me back to how this child will be made. With a man trapped in a room not too far from where I'm standing. I press my lips together, seeking any hint of Virius's taste on my mouth.

He's there. Just at the center of my lower lip. I tug the flesh I find there into my mouth and pull at the skin.

There is a note of the sweetness of the ripest grape. The robust smoke of wood. And a hint of iron, but there's no metallic taste.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a vision of him. He's standing in that ridiculous shirt featuring a caricature of my culture. The jeans are off, but the chaps still hang around his thick thighs. Peeking out from the leather of the chaps is Frankie. He raises his head as though he's looking for me. That single eye finds me, and a dollop of precum beads at the tip, as though Virius's dick is salivating.

Damn, I'm hard up. I should probably take Zuma's advice and jump Virius tonight—if I can get him to let me

ride him. He'll probably be more amenable now that Pia has a dagger at his throat.

Wait.

What?

I blink. Then I blink again. I'm not fantasizing.

Virius stands on the other side of the cave. Pia is behind him with a dagger at his throat. A bead of his blood trickles down his thick neck.

"Drop the knife, Pia." I'm moving as I talk, but I falter at Pia's next words.

"He's trying to escape."

My brain is beyond considering how Virius escaped the locked room. It focuses only on the one word: escape. He was trying to leave? He said he wouldn't. He said he'd stay.

Maybe I should let him go. If he's not here, then he can't impregnate me. If I'm not pregnant, then maybe I can go to college. And if he doesn't fulfill the prophecy, then he can't fulfill the part where he dies.

I give the voice in my head a rough shake. Neither of us can escape this prophecy. Destiny always finds you.

It doesn't matter what he wants, just as it doesn't matter what I want. Virius is going back under lock and key, and we are getting it on. He's going to put a baby in me whether he likes it or not.

All around me I hear feminine gasps. For a second, I worry that I've said that out loud. But I quickly realize that not a single eye, human or jaguar, is on me. Every female in this room is looking at the monster swaying between Virius's thighs.

Frankie is lifted high, with no hand from Virius. That cheeky snake leans a little to the right, and then to the left, as though he's dancing to an unheard snake charmer's tune. Then I realize Frankie is swaying in time to my beat as I march towards him and Virius.

"I wasn't going anywhere," he says when I reach him. "I thought I heard you in distress."

Once again, I'm brought up short. The man is my captive, and he thought he was coming to save me? He has a real hero complex.

"Now I see why she might want to anticipate the full moon."

I'm not sure I know who said it. But I know they all are thinking it now that they see what Virius is working with.

"Are all vampires hung like that?"

"I don't know, but I want to find out."

I slap Pia's hand away from Virius's neck. I glare at her, flashing my eyes. She's older than I am—all of them are. But she bows her head in deference.

Unlike wolves, jaguars don't have a hierarchal order. They are mostly loners. The only time they spend together as a pack is when they're raising cubs. Otherwise, they're highly territorial.

Pia's lucky I only slapped her hand and didn't bite it off. I take Virius by the upper arm and turn him so all the others can see of him is his ass. I only barely hold myself back from dropping trow and peeing on his leg. Only barely.

Now that they've all seen who he belongs to, I give him a tug to leave. Virius is larger and stronger than me. I know I would have no pull over him if he didn't want to go with me. Luckily, he follows my lead and we head back to the bedroom.

He doesn't know he's following me to his doom. I tell myself I don't care. He is not my destiny. The child is. He is only a tool, and I plan to use him.

CHAPTER NINE

We walk in silence down the stony pathway. My bare feet slap against smooth rocks. Her boots crunch along, grinding small stones into sand.

There is an itch at the center of my palm. I want to reach out and take her slight paw into mine like I've seen Hadrian do with Cari. I've never held a woman's hand before. What if I do it wrong? What if I crush her slender fingers in mine?

Looking down at her hand, I see that her fingers are not so slender. Her nails are short, not long and painted like Marechal's. Zahara's worked in the Durand vineyard for years. She knows the roughness of turning soil. She knows the prick of pruning shears. She undoubtedly can't handle my cock, but perhaps she can handle my hand.

Without a second thought, I reach for her.

"Ouch." I grimace, pulling my hand back from hers.

A trail of crimson beads at the tip of my forefinger. It's blood I can't afford to lose. Pressing my finger to my mouth, I look back down at Zahara's hand. How had I missed the gleam of the blade there?

"Were you trying to disarm me?" she asks.

"I was trying to hold your hand."

Zahara looks down at her hand; her fingers tighten on the hilt of her dagger. There isn't suspicion in her gaze, only confusion. As though she questions my battle tactic.

"Why?" she says.

I shrug, too embarrassed to explain. I might be Roman, but I am clearly not cut out for these antics. I need to dispense with the attempts at romance from here on out.

We have come to the end of the hall and can go no further. The mangled door blocks our path. Bending down, I

pick it up as though the metal slab weighs nothing, because it doesn't for me. I turn and wait for Zahara to go inside.

She doesn't move. She stands there, staring at the door, then at me. "You weren't trying to escape?"

There's something in her voice. It's not fear; I know what that smells like. It's acrid on my tongue, bitter like hopelessness. But I can't be sure. I've long since forgotten both of those emotions. I've had so few feelings for most of my life. My default setting is numb and detached.

This night with her, I am drowning in awareness and sensation. I don't care to come up for air if Zahara is the flood. I'm more than happy to exist as a piece of driftwood in the ocean of her.

"I told you I'd stay," I say.

She narrows her eyes as she looks from me to the door in my hands.

"I heard raised voices. I thought you were in trouble," I add.

Zahara rolls her eyes at that. Her shoulders slump, like a child who's just had a reprimand. She walks into the room and plops down on the cot. "Close the door behind you, will you?" she says.

I do as she bids me, fitting the door back into place. The knob will no longer work, which means the lock won't engage. I doubt any of the shifters have the strength to remove the slab. So, we will have our privacy.

Once I'm certain that we are isolated, I turn to her. Her gaze isn't on my face. It dips to my waist. She's looking down at the beast.

I bend down and gather my jeans from the floor. I don't bother to step either leg into the pants. Clearly, I'll lose the battle of wrangling my cock into the cloth. Stepping out of the chaps, I then tear the fabric of the leather. With a quick tie, I have a makeshift toga. My native garb is far more comfortable than the fashion of the day. Gaius always acts

as though he's got a pebble in his Italian loafers when I deign to walk around in this fashion.

Zahara doesn't complain. Which reminds me of something.

"Why were you arguing?" I ask as I finish making the knot to hold the fabric and the beast in place.

"Because of the prophecy. I told them you don't want to fuck me. Even though we both know that isn't true."

Her gaze is on my crotch. Though I've tied the beast up, it remains staunchly erect. Its fat head points directly at Zahara, as though asking her for a dance.

"That can't be comfortable," she says.

It's not. My balls are starting to turn blue, since the monster has been erect for the better part of a couple of hours.

"My sire used cock rings to keep her new bucks in order. If they displeased her, she'd yank out a valve of their hearts and lecture them as the wound healed. Or cut off their testicles if they fucked another without her permission."

Zahara gasps. Her gaze finally leaves my groin area and comes to my face.

"Oh, those grow back," I assure her. "There's a vampire queen in Africa who makes eunuchs out of her human warriors. I hear that makes them obedient."

Domitia might have played with the testes but she never whacked off the penises of her sirens. I've always thought it would be better to be a eunuch. But my cock would grow back. I know that for a fact as well.

"You weren't trying to escape," Zahara says. It's not a question this time.

"I'll never leave you," I say as I settle down on the cot beside her. "You're mine."

"You do remember that I captured you."

"That you did." I grin. "And I'm yours."

"Then you're going to have to fuck me and put a baby in me. Why don't we just get it over with now?"

She begins to unbutton her shirt. I don't stop her. I want to see her breasts.

The twin peaks that appear as she parts her shirt do not disappoint. They are lush brown mounds, topped with the darkest chocolate tips. My mouth waters and my fangs sharpen.

"Can I kiss them?"

Zahara grins, like a cat who has the cream within reach of her paws. She nods, and then gasps as I descend upon her.

I first take the left one in my mouth. I moan at the unexpected taste I find there. I expected her to be nothing but sweetness. Instead, her nipple is the rich bite of dark chocolate. The taste is harsh and not for the faint of heart, just like my wee warrior. The cocoa nibs are tart. They fill me with the warmth of a roasted flame.

I gather her body to me. My panther doesn't fight me. She wraps her arms around my back and digs her fingers into my hair. I feel claws. And I like it.

Her moan turns to a yelp as I flip her over onto her back. Then I'm on top of her, tonguing every lick of salt I find from the undersides of her breasts, in the valley between the two, and into the nooks and crannies of her pebbled nipples.

"Please, Virius, inside me."

Zahara lets go of my hair and reaches for my cock. Before she can work her fingers into the knot of my toga, I snag both her wrists in mine. She fights me, yanking to break free of my hold. She's strong, but I'm stronger. My fear of hurting her lessens.

"You want me inside you?" I ask.

"Finally, he's getting it," she huffs.

I keep my hold on her wrists with my left hand. I bring the fingers of my right hand between us. "Open."

Zahara opens her thighs. I grin down at her. The cheeky kitten. Instead of clarifying my meaning, I bring my mouth

to hers. When my lips meet hers, she obeys my original command.

I get lost in the kiss. Lost in her. In the taste, the touch, and feel of her. Her breasts were a dark treat, but her mouth is silky sweet. I'm so lost in the tangle of our tongues that I forget my original purpose.

Oh, right. She wanted me inside her. I'm going to oblige her.

With reluctance, I disentangle my tongue from hers. But I leave her mouth with one last, long lick. It causes Zahara to leave her mouth open, waiting for more. I take the opportunity to dip my index finger between her lips.

She suckles on the digit. The suction causes my cock to steal even more of the low blood supply in my system. I nearly lose my head as Zahara swirls her tongue around my finger, mimicking what she might do to my cock. But like I said, that will never happen. She is far too wee to take on that monster.

With my finger wet, I pull it from her mouth. Zahara whimpers in protest. But when she realizes where my hand is going, she moans with delight.

I slip my finger beneath the waistband of her cargo pants. There isn't a second waistband that I need to pass beneath her pants. She's not wearing any panties.

My finger takes its time trekking through the soft curls that hide her treasure. This is not a treasure hunt. I know exactly where the X of her spot is. I simply want to explore her body for a few seconds longer.

It's not just her body I want to explore. It's the feelings coming to life inside of me. I've never wanted this with a woman before. Sex has always been a job, a means to an end. For the first time in my life, I feel anticipation. I feel desire.

"Please, Virius."

No woman has ever begged me before. If she was a paying customer, she had free range to do with my body as

she pleased. Zahara's plea breaks a dam inside me. I want to hear that cry again.

I find her clitoris. The little bud is so engorged that my finger slips off and to the side. Zahara gasps and bucks beneath me.

I rub her again, with the same effect. My index finger slips to the other side. I play slip and slide for a few moments, reveling in Zahara's cries. Marveling as I watch her body tremble at only my touch.

"Please, Viri, please."

She bucks and whimpers as I leave her clit. It's a short journey to her opening. I slip my finger inside her.

Well, I attempt to slip inside, but it's a tight fit.

Zahara's body tenses as the tip of my index finger breeches her virgin entrance. Immediately, I try to pull out of her untried flesh. Her body clamps down on my finger. She closes her legs, trapping me inside of her.

I don't complain. I work with what I'm given.

I move in and out of her. Just the tip of my finger. Just an inch, in and out.

"More, Viri, please."

I know that I shouldn't. But I can't deny her *please*.

Using my thumb, I gather the liquid desire that has pooled between her thighs. With my thumb lubricated, I return to her clit, which has swollen to twice the size since my index finger left it. I press her button with my thumb, making tiny circles.

It does the trick. Zahara's legs relax open. Her inner muscles give, letting my index finger slide into her. I'm up to the knuckle now.

"Ahh," she hisses.

The sound is a mix of pleasure and pain. With any other woman, I wouldn't be able to hear the difference. With any other woman, I wouldn't have cared.

When I look into Zahara's eyes, I see the pain is already melting away. All that remains is desire.

“Kiss me,” she says.

I do as she asks. I give her what she wants. Because I am astounded that what she wants is me. My lips pressed against hers. My finger inside her.

Down below, the beast paces. It pulsates with a hunger that only grows. But I am prepared to starve that motherfucker. She can't handle my index finger. There's no way she can handle that fat prick.

I work my finger all the way inside her. At the same time, I rub her clit with my thumb. My lips capture her cries as she begins to tumble into ecstasy.

Zahara purrs against my lips as she climaxes, her body shaking and shivering. I swear I can see sparks from her skin as she shudders in ecstasy. There's a flash of obsidian fur as the tremors abate. Then she lies still.

Her eyes are closed. Her breathing is even. There's a satisfied smile on her face. She curls into my arms, just like a well-fed kitten, and falls asleep.

I pull my hand from her pants. The tip of my index finger is coated with her virgin's blood. I stare at the drop of crimson for a long moment. Then, with reverence, I place my finger in my mouth and suck.

My eyes close as more sparks fly behind my eyelids. She tastes like magic. She tastes like mine.

Below, the beast settles, secure in the knowledge that it will have its turn in due course. I push that thought away and pull Zahara securely into my arms. Then, for the first time in my life, I cuddle another living being.

CHAPTER TEN

ZAHARA

I'm used to sleeping with other people. My family grew up poor, living in the poorest parts of towns and villages. There were always other cousins kicking out on the mattress and stealing the threadbare covers. I learned to train my mind to think of others' snores as night sounds from one of those fancy spa machines. The snorts and snuffles were accompanied by the chatter of the creepy crawlies out in the fields—which usually harmonized with the snores—because an open window was the only ventilation.

I wake to nothing but a hum in the underground cave. Virius doesn't snore. He is silent and still in his sleep, which is the reason why I woke. I've never had my own room, and I've never slept under the blanket of a man.

Virius is warm against my flesh. He doesn't kick or smother me. He holds me close to his chest, as though I am precious. His body is hunched to the edge of the cot in an uncomfortable position. He holds himself awkwardly, but he doesn't fidget. The vast majority of the small cot is left for me.

When I awoke, I worried that he might be dead. Because of the prophecy. Not because I care about him.

True, he just gave me an out of body experience with his fingers. Calling that orgasm an out of body experience is a big deal for a woman who can shift her body into another form. I'd nearly shifted as I shuddered in the onslaught of bliss. The panther in me had sat up and clawed to get out. She wanted to experience the pleasure first hand. She'd nearly gotten out, and would have if I hadn't fallen into the deepest, most contented sleep of my life.

All at the hands of this man. I shift to look down at him. He looks peaceful, boyish even. I tamp down that skip my heart just threatened.

Virius Serrano has no place in my heart. I have to fulfill my destiny, and he is the means to that end. Even though soon after, he will come to an end.

I move from under his arm. When I do, his hand flops down like a lifeless doll's. My heart skips that beat now. Maybe he is dead?

At the thought, my heart comes to a full stop. He can't be. He wasn't even inside me. There is no way I'm pregnant. The books I read weren't that graphic, but I know enough biology to know that a finger-fucking won't get me knocked up.

I cup my hand to Virius's cheek. He is cold to the touch. But I feel the slight hiss of breath from his nose. My chest loosens, and I begin to relax.

I have to remind myself: he is a vampire. He sleeps like the dead because he is not truly alive. He died hundreds of years ago.

I'm going to bang a quadricentenarian, yet the man doesn't look a day over twenty-one. That has to be how old he was when he was turned. So, technically, he's my age.

I brush a tendril of his curly hair from his face. He doesn't stir. For such a big and menacing-looking man, he is so soft.

Virius's features are relaxed in his sleep. Just looking at his face, it's hard to believe that he'd hurt a fly. If I'm honest, I can say that this man is beautifully created. At least my son will be handsome.

My fingers brush over Virius's broad shoulders. The span of them takes up the entire width of the small cot. My own body barely touches the mattress now. Virius is the cushion upon which my body rests. My torso is propped up on his chest and abs. My legs are twined with his.

I move my hand from his shoulders to the center of his chest. I'm surprised to find his heart beating. It's a faint beat but it's there. It's pumping someone else's blood through his system.

I wonder who he drank from last. I wonder if he'll be thirsty soon. The thought of him piercing my skin should be disgusting, but I press my thighs together as a vision of it flits through my mind.

I bend my leg at the knee and bump up against the anaconda in his toga. Virius is hard, erect, even in his sleep. I guess that beast never sleeps.

He says he won't have sex with me because he's so big and I'm so small. I'm sure every guy thinks that, but with Virius, it is one hundred percent true.

I saw what he is working with. It writhes beneath the cloth even now. His cock is the same thickness as my forearm, and just as long. He might be right. There is no way that thing is getting inside me comfortably.

So why does the thought of trying to fit it in arouse me?

I press my thighs together again. Belatedly, I forget that my knee is in his crotch. So instead of pressing my thighs together, I rub up against the anaconda. It slithers closer to me.

When Virius spoke about his dick, it wasn't with pride. It was with wariness. He spoke as though his manhood was separate from him as a man.

My hand trails down his chest, which is now bare and rid of that awful shirt. As I move south, the snake under wraps pulses against my thigh. With a glance upwards, I see that Virius still slumbers peacefully.

Maybe his dick does have a mind of its own because it is certainly not slumbering. It's coiling inside the fabric, like a snake being charmed by the movements of my hand. As I inch closer, it waves, bobbing and weaving to the sound of my quickening breaths.

I move closer. I am at the knot of the toga. With a tug of my thumb, the tie loosens. Just one more tug, and it'll be enough to set the monster free. The monster moves closer to the binding, ready to strike. My fingers poise to tug, and then—

A hand clamps down on my wrist. I look up to see Virius's eyes open and on me. He doesn't say a word, but censure is written all over his face.

"You know this is part of the deal," I say. "In two nights, there will be a lunar eclipse and we'll sleep together and make a baby; a son. It's prophesied."

"Prophecies are not always what they seem."

"It's my destiny to conceive your child and restore the rightful ownership and fruitfulness to the vineyard."

"I've given you the land." He kisses my fingertips, flicking his tongue over a hangnail I've been tugging at all day. "We are having trouble with the crop, but there are people working on it."

I know that Marechal Durand is working to figure out why the Serrano vines aren't bearing fruit. I tried to tell her her logic and chemicals would have no effect, but she didn't listen. Now she's mated to Gaius Serrano, which she doesn't seem at all put out about.

That still doesn't mean she can get the grapes to grow. Only breaking the curse will. And to do that, Virius will need to get busy putting a baby in me.

"I'm rich, you know," he says without any of the scumminess that a man born in wealth would say. "I can give you whatever you want."

"I want to fulfill my destiny. That means you coming inside me. Literally."

"You want me inside you, and you want to come?"

"Yes."

"Done."

Before I can gasp in shock, the air is knocked out of me. Virius flips me on my back and is over me. He tugs my pants

down and is between my legs. He spreads my thighs wide, and then he's inside of me.

But not in the way I just asked for. I can't be bothered to mind as he makes good on his word—and I am coming while he's inside of me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

VIRIUS

I warned her that prophecies are not always what they seem at face value. Words are passed down from one person to another. Translated into different languages, all of which have different meanings.

Zahara wanted me to be inside her while she came. I was happy to oblige in her pleasure. Only not with the part of me that she wanted.

With her naked and stripped bare, I shove my tongue into her cunny. No preamble. No light, little flicks. She didn't ask for that. She asked to have me inside her, and I am.

I have never done this myself. My tongue is a normal size. The women who paid to see me only wanted my cock and the unnatural tight fullness it could give them. They weren't interested in using or hearing from my mouth, so I've never performed oral sex. But I've seen it done many times.

I lift my head as I spread Zahara's thighs. Her cunny is a beautiful blush of dark pink. The ripest of berries.

Her scent makes me dizzy with want. The beast below stirs, throbbing and pulsing as I take her in. I've never had much control over my cock. It rose and fucked with its own mind. I would simply turn my mind off until it released into whatever woman was using it. Once it released and went limp, I slowly came back to myself. Until it stirred again, ready to service another.

I ignore it now as it throbs with need. I want this for myself. I don't want to zone out and miss a single second of Zahara. Not with her pretty mewls and her urgent pants. Her claws dig into my shoulders, enough so I bleed.

I should tell her to stop. But I don't. I like the thought of my blood on her. I want all to know that she is mine.

I put my nose right up to her flesh, and inhale. She is heaven. My fangs ache to take a bite of her and bring more of that ambrosia inside of myself.

"What are you doing?" she asks, her voice a mix of desire and uncertainty.

"I don't know," I admit. It's hard to form words over the throbbing of both my cock and my fangs.

"Were you about to bite me?"

I close my mouth, but it's impossible to swallow down the evidence of my desire.

"Don't," she says.

Her eyes flash with what I know is fear. Doesn't she know that I would rip out my fangs if I thought they would hurt her? Already, I'm contemplating castration.

I know Zahara wants my cock, but it can't give her what she wants. Vampires cannot create new life. My cock has nothing to give her. But I do.

I force my fangs back before I promise her, "I won't bite you."

Those are the last words that I am capable of forming. Zahara eyes me warily, but she is powerless to stop what is about to happen. She is a strong warrior, but I want to bring her to her knees. I wrap her knees at my ears and take another taste.

Zahara cries out. The sound of her fills my ears. The taste of her is on my tongue. My hands are full of her flesh as I hold her still.

I don't have to move my tongue much. She undulates her hips up and down. It's a tight rocking as I hold her torso.

I allow her the movements, thrilled to know that she likes what I am doing to her. I could lick her forever. I could gorge myself on the taste of her, the velvety feel of her flesh against my tongue.

The more I lick, the wetter she gets. The wetter she gets, the sweeter she tastes. Yes, this is heaven. I will fight any demon who dares to try to take me back to the hell of my prior existence.

I delve my tongue into her opening, so deep that my nose rests on her clit and my chin on her perineum. Zahara purrs, low and deep, more lioness than kitten. I know the sounds of pleasure, having heard them from women riding my cock. I also know the sounds of pain when they take too much of it. Zahara vocalizes only pleasure.

I push deeper inside, needing to fill her with all that I am. She stills as I swirl my tongue, gathering up every drop of her essence. A gasp fills my ears as she inhales sharply. Then there is a long, deep pulsing of her walls around my tongue. More wetness coats my tongue.

This taste is pure saccharine. It floods my senses and goes straight to my head, giving me a warm brain freeze. But the freeze thaws quickly as I swallow the honey down.

Zahara's cries continue as her body shivers. For an instant, I'm sure I feel fur and not flesh in my hands. Her moans turn to growls as she crests the height of her pleasure.

My own hips rock into the mattress as the beast demands its due. It moves of its own accord, but the mattress is all it will get. I'm not sharing her with it.

I remove my tongue from her entrance and lap up the juices that have overflowed on her pussy's lips. My tongue latches onto the bud at the apex of her thighs, and I pull on the engorged flesh I find there.

Zahara cries out, a shuddery sound of pleasure. Her eyes flash that catlike gold at me again. I can see the panther in them, readying to rise. She shuts her eyes, and the image is gone.

I suckle the bud, and more of that exquisite moisture seeps out of her. Again, she is rocking against my tongue. I cover her mons with my entire mouth, and gulp her down.

The next time she cries out, there is a note of pain. I lift my head. Her eyes are glazed as the tremors tighten their hold on her. I know this look, too. She is drunk with pleasure. If I give her more, it could turn painful. I have watched women take more and come out sore. As much as it pains me, I back off from my delectable little treasure.

Bringing Zahara to my chest, I wrap her naked form inside my arms and cradle her. It's another thing that I have never experienced or have done to another, but I find it easy with her. Her wee body fits against my chest as if I was made for her. I'm coming to believe that I was. For the first time in my life, I feel that I have a sense of purpose.

She may be right. I do have a destiny. It is to pleasure and protect her. It's a future that I can say I look forward to.

Zahara falls asleep in my arms. My wee kitten can throw a punch, but she can't hold her pleasure. After her orgasms, she's out like a young buck who's busted a nut for the first time.

She curls into me with complete trust as she dozes. I feel strong having this warrior seek comfort in me. I want to give her everything she asks for. Perhaps there is a way for me to do so. There are rumors in the vampire world.

I hold my treasure close to my heart as I think. But the thinking doesn't get too far. My brain is far too addled for lack of blood. I'll have to do something about that sooner rather than later if I am to keep my promise of not biting her.

With great reluctance, I move Zahara off my chest and onto the cot. After pulling the sheet over her naked torso, I press a kiss to her temple. She doesn't stir as I move the door aside and walk out of the room. At the end of the path, I take the right turn that will lead me out of the cave.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ZAHARA

My dreams are often those of running. Not those dreams where I'm running from zombies, or ducking to hide my nakedness from my classmates. I wish those were my dreams, but I've never been in a formal classroom.

No, my dreams aren't anything like the human dreams of running away. In my dreams, I run on all fours.

I'm climbing trees. Jumping in the water. My inner cat loves to play. She is often alone, as is the nature of a jaguar.

So it shocks me when I'm standing still in this dream. It shocks me even more that I'm standing on two legs instead of four. My face is tilted up as the sun kisses my eyelids, my nose, my mouth.

Then I feel another kiss. One made of flesh, not sunlight. I turn to find Virius standing in the light of the sun. I am inside the circle of his arms. The heat coming off his flesh rivals that of the sun. The smile on his face completely eclipses the star.

Damn, the man is beautiful even inside my mind. That wicked grin of his makes me press my thighs together beneath the threadbare sheets. I know what that mouth can do. That mouth is what sent me into dreamland way before my bedtime.

Like vampires, jaguars are nocturnal. Unlike vampires, we don't mind the sun. Which is when I finally note that my vampire is standing in the sunlight.

Something tells me to wake, that there is danger, as the sun moves across the sky. But Virius doesn't look up at it. He looks down. At my belly. My belly, which is full with a baby; his baby.

Again, my mind doesn't comprehend the logic. First a vampire in the sun. Now a baby in my belly after I was fingered and tongued. That's not how this works. Right?

The sun passes through clouds, casting a shadow around us. The shadows move across Virius's face and my belly.

Then the rays are back. They get closer and closer to him. I smell the acrid scent of burning flesh.

Virius's skin catches fire, but he doesn't appear to notice. His hand is on my belly. He smiles that unpracticed, lopsided grin at me as his skin burns away. The red flames eat at his honey-kissed skin. Black spots are all that is left behind as the sun's rays consume him.

And then, he is nothing. He is no one. And I am alone.

I wake up with a scream in my throat. I choke before the air can rush out of me. I inhale a gasp, trying to inflate my lungs, to call out.

Virius is not beside me. Before I'd fallen asleep, I remember being wrapped inside his arms. Now I'm alone in the cot, wrapped only in the pitiful excuse of a blanket. And he is gone.

I look frantically around the room. There is no sunlight from above. Nothing seeps through the cracks.

I look over to the door. There's a crack in its opening, as though it had been moved aside. There is only one person who could move that door aside with his bare hands.

My feet hit the ground before I realize I'm running. I slip through the crack in the door and dash down the narrow passageway. It doesn't dawn on me until I'm in the alcove that I'm naked.

I've never been shy of nudity. Animals don't wear clothes, and those that do dream of murdering the humans who dress them up in the shameful outfits. Shifting isn't like in the movies, where beings shift with their clothes fully intact. The proportions of woman and large cat are entirely different, so the threads will always stretch and break, regardless of how much either creature might diet.

But when I get to the alcove, the two women there look up and smirk at my nudity. Well, Zuma smirks as she looks me over. Pia purses her lips as she takes in my state of undress.

It takes me a second to realize why. Their ears are likely still ringing from what Virius was doing to me just a couple of hours ago.

"Where is he?" I demand.

"He left," they both say in unison.

My heart is pounding loudly in my ears, but not so loud that I miss the difference in inflection in their voices. Zuma's voice asks a question, as though she can't believe Virius would leave. Pia's tone of voice is more of a statement, like a confirmation of something she was waiting for.

I turn and focus on Pia. "You let him go?"

"He didn't come this way," she says.

But I can hear that there are words unsaid. Pia doesn't agree with how Itzel and the other elders are going about this matter. She has no love for vampires, but she believes that Virius should have a choice in how we proceed. Otherwise, it makes him a sacrifice.

"It sounded like you got what you needed from him," says Zuma.

My cheeks heat. Not because of what she heard, but because she's wrong about what she heard. I did not get what I needed from Virius. I didn't do what I was supposed to do with him to make a baby. But I don't want to explain that.

"Come and eat," says Zuma. "You must be famished after taking all of him on."

She winks a knowing eye at me. The trouble is, I don't know. I have no idea.

"I'll call the others," Zuma continues. "It's time to celebrate. The gods will be appeased."

"Don't," I say while turning towards the exit.

"Where are you going?" Pia calls after me.

"I'm going to find him."

"I don't blame you, sweetie," Zuma singsongs. "I'd tap that a couple more times if I were you, before his expiration date."

I have to force my panther to ignore her remarks. Zuma won't be tapping anything on Virius. He is mine. I just have to find my captive, and recapture him.

Stepping outside, I catch his scent. He hasn't gone far. I crouch down on two feet and let the panther take my body. With my nose to the ground, I find his trail. He won't escape me.

I'll catch him. And then what? Have my way with him, and set in motion his untimely death?

I have to. I don't have a choice. Neither of us do. Destiny is a bitch like that.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

VIRIUS

I peer down at the blood bag in my hand. It's my favorite type: B-negative. It's not from a typical blood bank, either. It's stock from Club Toxic. The label on the back of the bag says it was donated by a little sub named Layla, whose veins were tapped while she was being flogged.

Layla most definitely enjoyed her beating. The sweet aroma of the endorphins in the blood tickles my nose. But still, my mouth doesn't water at the thought of downing this sweet blood. My fangs feel limp at the thought of puncturing the plastic to get the life-giving blood into my sluggish veins.

There's only one vein I want to tap. Only one source I want to gorge myself on. But that spicket is resoundingly set to the *No* position.

Still, a man has to eat.

With my fangs uninterested, I grab a blade from the knife block. Using the pointy end of the steak knife, I punch a hole in the bag. When the trickle of blood hits my tongue, it's not as I expected.

Instead of the salty sweetness of the B-negative variety I've grown to love, the blood tastes like a mixture of sawdust and copper. I bend over the sink and spit it out. Turning on the faucet, I drown out the taste with hot water.

"What have I told you about leaving the refrigerator open?"

Peering through the running faucet water, I see Gaius standing in the doorway of the kitchen. He is dressed immaculately, as always. His suit is tailored to his body, not

a thread or hair out of place. The elegance he cloaks himself in belies his birth, which was just as low as mine.

"For Fate's sake, Virius, it's the twenty-first century. Didn't we agree on modern clothing and not loincloths?"

"You escaped?" The feminine voice coming from behind Gaius belongs to his mate, Marechal. She is also covered in elegance. Her gown is a deep purple that matches her grape-colored eyes.

Marechal takes a step towards me. But before she reaches me, a shorter version of her flings herself into my arms.

"Viri, you escaped," says Cari as she crushes me to her.

Cari is a newly turned vampire. There is still a lot of strength in her untried limbs, enough that I cough and wheeze under her affectionate assault.

"Cari, let him go," says Hadrian. "Either you'll kill him with your strength, or I'll kill him because he has a hard-on while holding my wife."

All eyes go down to my crotch. Sure enough, the beast below stirs inside the loincloth. Cari jumps back as though the snake were preparing to strike. Marechal takes a step back as well.

"I thought you said you couldn't get it up anymore," says Hadrian as Cari returns to his side.

"I couldn't," I say. "Until her."

"Me?" asks Cari, pointing a finger at her chest.

"No, Zahara. It wants her. It wants her badly. I've been hard all day. My balls have actually turned bl—"

"Virius!" Both Hadrian and Gaius hold up their hands as they shout.

I move my hand away from the knot of the toga where I had intended to untie the fabric to show them my agony and shame.

"I don't know what to do," I say.

Marechal's brows rise as she dips her mouth to Gaius's ear. "Have you two had The Talk?"

Her voice is a whisper. She has only been in the vampire world for a few days. She doesn't seem to realize that our hearing is exceptional.

"Trust me," Cari says to me, "you don't want Mare to give you The Talk."

"I give a great talk," Marechal harrumphs. "I did fine with you and Arneis."

"Sure," says Cari. "And now look at us. All mated to vampires—"

"Virius," Gaius cuts his wife and sister-in-law off. "What happened with you and the shifter?"

"She wants a child."

"Can..." Cari stops and starts. "Can vampires have children?"

"No, *minou*." Hadrian presses a kiss to her temple. Regret is heavy on his brow.

"That's not entirely true," says Gaius. "It has happened before."

"You mean Dom?" says Hadrian.

Gaius nods. I note that his brows are heavy as well. But not with regret, with concern. His lips are set in a firm line. It's the look he gives when he wants to keep something from me.

"Who's Dom?" I ask. "A vampire? He has a child? Do you know how he did it?"

Gaius holds up his hands as though that motion could stop my questions. "All I know is that he has a child with a human woman, and that the birth came at a cost."

"So, it is possible?"

"We don't know what the costs are." Gaius sighs.

"It doesn't matter. I'll pay whatever to give my mate what she wants."

"You're mated?" says Gaius. "It's barely been twenty-four hours."

"And how soon did you know Marechal was yours?"

Gaius purses his lips. Then his features relax as he turns to the woman he handed over the keys to his private sex dungeon in Club Toxic for.

"And you with Cari," I say to Hadrian.

Hadrian pulls Cari to him. His arms wrap around the woman who fell from the sky and into his arms. He hasn't let the little daredevil go since that skydiving accident, which turned out to be his good fortune.

"You love her?" asks Gaius.

"I don't know what that is," I say.

I thought I'd loved my mother, but she sold me into a life of sexual slavery without a backward glance. True, it was always going to be my fate to be a whore. But under any other *lena* of my time, it would have been for only one lifetime. Belonging to Domitia put my body in servitude for many lifetimes.

I know what it means to survive. I know what it means to serve. But to love?

"You love Marechal," I say to Gaius. "What does it feel like?"

"It feels like..." He looks down at Marechal. She smiles up at him, waiting patiently for his response. "It feels like what I remember sunshine to be. When she's in a room, it feels like the sun is shining on my face."

Tears sparkle at the corners of Marechal's eyes. Gaius dips his head to capture the drops before they fall.

I can't remember what sunshine feels like. So, I have no idea what he means. I look out through the glass patio door and into the dark night.

A shadow moves out of the foliage. Eyes flash at me, like lightning streaking across a stormy sky. A large black cat comes up to the glass. Its eyes are intent on me. Its fangs glisten in the moonlight.

"I think it's for you," says Gaius.

I walk up to the door and pull the latch. Once the door is open, the jaguar transforms into a woman.

Zahara stands naked on the other side of the door. She is streaked with mud up and down her calves. There are scratches from vines on her forearms. But her breasts are untouched, the nipples erect and begging for a taste.

My thirst increases at the sight of them. I also feel dizzy with the low blood count I'm working with. I ignore my organs' needs in favor of my desire for her.

I need to get my hands on her. But when I reach for her, the claws come out. She smacks my hand away, leaving four bloody marks.

"You left me," she says as she stomps inside.

Her muddy feet leave tracks on the floor. I know Gaius will be pissed. But he stays silent behind me. The silence gives me a second to replay Zahara's words.

"I would never leave you."

"I woke up. You were gone. Meaning: you left me."

"I got hungry." I point to the bag of blood on the counter.

Zahara doesn't spare my evidence a glance. She jabs the claw of her index finger into my bare chest, drawing out another stream of blood.

"You. Are. My. Captive." She enunciates every word with a puncturing poke.

I should feel pain. But with each poke, I feel like she's breaking through a dense fog. Each fissure in my chest feels like a ray of sunlight brightening me from the inside out. Is this love?

"Your captive?" I capture her hand and press it into my bloody chest, right over my heartbeat. "Right. I forgot. I didn't want to wake you. I thought that last orgasm you had would've put you out for longer."

A flush spreads across Zahara's cheeks and her eyes dart over my shoulder at the crowd behind us. She stands naked before them, but it's the mention of her orgasms that makes her blush.

"I figured I'd be back before you woke up," I say in my defense.

“That’s not how imprisonment works.”

“I’ll tell you the next time before I leave, okay?”

“Fine.” The word is said in exasperation, like there is no fight left in her. She looks exhausted.

I gather her body into my arms. She doesn’t fight me. She rests her head under my chin as I walk her out of the kitchen and head to my bedroom.

“You’re dirty. Let me clean you up.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ZAHARA

The water is cool on my toes. A stream of current rushes towards my ankles, rising up to massage my calf muscles. I sigh as I sink down into the depths, then yelp when I feel the jets.

Back home, I often bathed in the hot springs surrounding an active volcano. But the lava had nothing on the powered steam in this tub. For one, there are no craggy rocks at my back. This tub is cushioned. My feet don't sink into silt but instead rest on cool porcelain. When I look up, I see another familiar sight: a tall, dark mountain. This peak is capped with sandy blond hair instead of angry red fire.

Virius leans over the tub. His large, thick fingers massage the soap into a cloth. The scent is divine. He bids me lean forward. When I do as he asks, he puts the cloth on my back and begins to scrub.

I only barely stop myself from mewling. A purr escapes my throat. A shudder runs over my shoulder blades. I only just stop myself from arching in the tub and offering him my belly. Because what I truly want to do is go on all fours and lift my tail for him.

How is it that I've wound up naked in the bathroom of my prisoner? I'm the one weaponless and at his mercy as he breaks down all my defenses with a bar of exotic smelling soap?

I can't find it in me to be chagrined. I have absolutely no intention of getting out of this predicament. For so much of my life, I have been revered as someone who would bring about a revolution. But no one has ever tended to me in this manner. No one has ever treated me like I was precious. I

may have been tasked by the Fates, but this is the first time I've felt worship.

And I like it.

The water sluices down my body. Bubbles form and pop, and run down my skin in rivulets. Virius's hand follows the downpour, making a waterfall from my shoulder caps. I shiver as the droplets run over the mounds of my breasts.

"Is it too hot?" he asks.

"It's perfect," I sigh.

"You're perfect," he says.

Taking my hand, he scrubs each of my fingertips. The care and concentration he gives each nail is more attention than anyone has paid me—the actual me and not the me in a prophecy—in my whole life. I want to run out and dig my fingers into the dirt just to have Virius clean them again. Negative attention is still attention, and I want any form of attention this man will give me.

But I don't have to run out and make a mess to hold Virius's attention. My hands are only a starting block. He runs the cloth over my face next.

"Close your eyes," he says.

If he had said these words to me a few hours ago, I would have snorted and palmed my dagger. Now I tilt my head back and do as he commands. My reward is swift. With one hand, Virius cradles my chin in his palm. With the other, he gently wipes away the stress of the night, of the last day, of the last few years of my life.

He wipes each eyelid. The sides of my nose. The space above my upper lip. He scrubs behind my ears. The back of my neck.

By the time he reaches my breasts, I am shivering with need. I know he must feel it too. But when I open my eyes to check, his face is a mask of focus and concentration.

"Get in the tub with me," I say.

"Is that another order?" He says it with a grin at the corner of his mouth.

He should know better than to play with a cat. He's dangling a ball of yarn in front of the face of a feline who has sharp claws.

Instead of lashing out to get what I want, I whisper, "Please?"

That catches him off guard. His hand stills. His jaw works as he swallows something thick down his throat.

The cloth falls into the tub. The white fabric is flung to the center when it hits the jets. Then it sinks down to the bottom in surrender.

Slowly, Virius stands. He's dressed only in the makeshift loincloth of his tattered clothing. I watch as he tugs at the knot of the toga. It doesn't take much force for his cock to spring free. Frankie must've been working the lock of his imprisonment from the inside.

Virius cups himself. His hands aren't big enough to cover the beast he's un-toga'd. "Remember what I said."

I nod, though I have no idea what we're talking about. I'm too hypnotized by the single eye of his cock.

I'd felt Frankie pressed against me earlier. But seeing him again... well, damn. I forgot how truly massive that monster was.

Virius's cock is easily the width of my forearm, and as long. There truly is no way that anaconda is fitting inside me. So why do my thighs press together at the possibility?

Viri steps into the tub behind me. His body weight displaces the water and it sloshes on the ground. I wonder how much of that displacement comes from what he carries between his thighs.

I turn so that I'm facing him. Digging around in the water, I find the washcloth of surrender. I raise that sudsy white flag and begin scrubbing him.

He watches me warily, and then with growing curiosity, as though no one has ever bathed him before. Then I remember what he said about his mother.

"Have you always wanted to be a mother?" he asks.

I'm shocked by his question. I don't go with my normal answer of, *it's my destiny*. Because in the past forty-eight hours, he's made me feel like I have a choice—though I know that I don't.

"Doesn't every woman?" I reply.

I curse under my breath at the insensitivity of my words. By his account, his mother did not want him. Had, in fact, sold him into slavery.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"For what?" Virius leans into my touch, much like a big cat would. "Oh, you mean my mother?"

He inhales deeply, his nose an inch away from my hair. He holds that breath for a long time. His exhale sounds reluctant. When he opens his eyes, he takes the cloth from me and pulls me into his arms. He turns my body so that my back is to his front. As he fits me into the cradle of his form, I feel him adjust Frankie. But there's not much adjusting he can do. I feel the impression of his cock against my spine. My temperature rises against the warm cocoon of his chest.

"She could've left me on the street when I was pulled from her womb, but she didn't."

My hackles rise at the mention of another woman on Virius's lips. Then I remember what I'd asked him only a moment ago. He's talking about his mother.

"She brought me inside. She left food for me... sometimes. It was always clear that I would need to fend for myself. I just..."

He stays silent for a long time. Part of my brain isn't interested in his words, it's too focused on the warmth radiating from his body. He is hotter than the stream of the water from the jets. I want to know more about this man. I want both the light and the dark pieces of him.

"You just what?"

"If my mother had asked me to, I would've chosen to go with Domitia, to help her to become free."

"Domitia is the one who enslaved you?"

Behind me, Virius's muscles tense. Frankie stops his incessant pulsing and actually slackens against my back. "I don't like her name on your lips."

"I don't like that she tried to break you."

"She didn't try. She did break me. I'm not a whole man; I know that. I wasn't born with all my faculties. Then becoming the favored pet to a sadist didn't help matters."

"There's nothing wrong with you. You didn't do anything wrong. There were bad people in your life who were supposed to protect you. They're the broken ones."

"I would do it all again if it would lead me to you."

I turn to face him. His gaze is hooded, but he hides nothing. The look in his eyes is just far away, as though he's trapped in memories.

I need to pull him back. I want him in the present, with me. This man has been through unimaginable pain. He should be raging against the world. Instead, he holds me gently in his arms.

I want to hold him too. But not in his arms. I reach down into the water and find the thick mass of flesh between us.

Virius hisses as my fingertips graze his cock. His large hand cups mine, readying to push it away.

"Please," I say. "Please, let me touch you."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

VIRIUS

*I*t is the *please* that does it. No one has ever begged me for anything. Except for their life.

Zahara knows I will never harm a hair on her head. I have proven to her that I only seek her happiness, her security, her well-being. Hell, I laid my fortune at her feet within a few hours of meeting her. And still, all she has asked of me is the one thing I am loath to give to her.

Please, let me touch you.

No one has ever asked. All my life, things have only been taken from me. And the thing most taken has been what lies between my thighs. So, I hesitate when Zahara asks permission. Being the warrior that she is, she takes my hesitation for compliance. With the first touch of her fingertip against the beast, he strikes out.

My body is sent careening in two diverging directions. My back arches as though I've been struck by lightning. But the rod is coming from me. It's the beast crash landing in the other direction. It bolts right into Zahara's palm.

My mind explodes as I try to put the pieces of my shattered consciousness back together. A thick fog settles all around me as sensations pour down from a thunderstorm of emotions. I try to move my legs, to lift my arms. It feels impossible.

The only thing that I can feel is a heatwave of pressure coming from my groin area. Looking down, I expect to see that my cock is on fire. The thought of my cock being burned off doesn't concern me. It'll take a while for the organ to regenerate. In that time, I can have peace of mind as I lie with Zahara, knowing that for a few days, it can't harm her.

As the fog in my mind slowly clears, I see that there are no flames between my thighs. There is golden flesh against my own. A hand.

The fingers of that hand are long, but not slender. The nails are chipped and ragged, entirely unlike the manicured hands of my regular clientele. But the fingers are female.

Zahara.

She's touching me with those working woman's hands. I feel the calluses on her thumb as she strokes downward. That rough piece of skin lags and catches on my glans at the tip. The contact causes my balls to tighten. As they do, a coil of heat tightens in them, pulling at the skin around the beast, causing it to tighten and I gasp.

"Oh Fates, did I hurt you?" Zahara moves her hand from my cock.

I let out a harsh breath. Not one of relief. One of need. For once, both the beast and I are in agreement. We need her hand back on our flesh.

"I've never done this before. Am I doing it wrong? I want to make you feel as good as you made me feel."

Her words are all a jumble. It will take too much concentration to try and understand them. I don't have enough blood to divert to my head. All the fluid in my body has rushed down to the throbbing flesh between my thighs.

"Show me what to do. Show me how you touch yourself when you masturbate."

Masturbate? I've never done it. Why would I want to rouse that monstrous part of me?

"Oh, I know what I'm missing. Lube," she says.

I'm cognizant enough to watch as Zahara picks up the soap I used to clean her body. She rubs her hands together to build lather. Then she places not one but both hands on me.

"*Fuuuuuutuo.*" I bellow the ancient Roman curse.

The thunderstorm is back. It has brought with it furies from the seas. The avenging spirits come to life inside me

and whip up a frenzy in my lower belly. Electricity crackles everywhere Zahara's fingers touch my cock, as though my blood and the mythological creatures are trying to get out of my flesh to get to hers.

What magic is this woman wielding over me? All thoughts of stopping her have left my mind. There isn't much left in there aside from getting closer to her.

"Is that better?"

Better? I had no idea that any good could come to me from my cock. No, this isn't better. This is the best thing that has ever happened to me.

I peer down into the water. My cock can be clearly seen through the suds of the bath. The red tip doesn't appear angry. It strains with the same objective: it's eager to get closer to her. The veins running along the sides of my flesh move and pulse to Zahara's strokes. Even my balls coil and tighten, pulling up closer to get nearer to her as she comes close to the root of me.

I finally understand the meaning of the saying: *she has him by the balls*. My balls have been had by hundreds of women, thousands. But not a single one of them ever had me. I never felt anything more than stiff as they impaled themselves on my shaft, followed by a moment of relief after my seed spilled.

With Zahara's hands on me, I feel the seed building inside of me. I feel a low heat in my back that pulses in time with the rhythm of her strokes. It comes from the beast, a promise of pleasure that it's sharing with me.

For hundreds of years, I've been cut off from feeling any of this. My mind would always shut down when my cock became erect to do its duty. But now... now, I want this.

I want to be with Zahara. I want to be around her. I want to be a part of her. I want to be inside of her.

My hips begin to thrust my cock into her hand, seeking more friction. I want to shake the suds off her hands. Even that thin layer of lubrication is too much space between us.

I reach out to her. Her flesh is hot in the cool waters of the bath. My hands slide down to cup the globes of her lush ass as she settles her knees over my hips. There is barely an inch between us, only enough space for her hand around my thick cock.

For a moment, I panic. Worry creases my brow as I look down. But my cock doesn't try to worm itself into her sheath.

It stands erect between our bellies, its single eye focused squarely up and on Zahara as she handles it.

"Good?" she asks, speeding up her strokes.

I can't answer. I can't remember the English language. It would take too much to remember the single-syllabled word for agreement. So, I nod my head in the universal language of *fuck, yeah*.

With two hands, Zahara strokes long and firm, from the base of my cock all the way up to the tip. I am uncircumcised, but there is no give in my taut foreskin. I can feel the lifelines on her palms. I can feel the grooves where her fingers meet her palm, then bend at the knuckle, and the ones just before her fingertips.

She circles the fat head of my erection and it weeps into her hand. The pre-cum catches in the lifelines of her palm before being washed away by the cool water. Just that small release has me shuddering.

My gaze is half-lidded, but my eyes are open enough to see Zahara grinning. My heart skips a beat at the sight. Domitia grinned whenever she thought of a new heinous way to inflict pain.

Zahara is not Domitia. Zahara smiles because she likes my pleasure. She is the only one to offer any to me.

My arms circle around Zahara's back. I pull her to me, needing to be surrounded by her. The bright smell of her. The fiery taste of her. The light in her eyes.

She is sunlight to me, exactly as I remember it. Warm rays on my face. Soft heat cradling my back. A glow that

halos around me even after I've closed my eyes or gone inside.

I now understand what Gaius meant. I'm sure of what this is that I'm feeling. I want to tell her, but there is an urgent need that cuts the line of my declaration.

The tension inside me is at breaking point. I am a dam ready to burst if just one more droplet of water falls on me. I am a balloon ready to pop with just a whisper of air.

Zahara strokes down.

Everything inside of me, everything that I've held behind protective walls, breaks free.

Surprisingly, the tension doesn't loosen from my cockhead first. It starts in my hips. The warm tidal wave rushes inward, to my groin area. The spasms start in my balls as they tighten, releasing hold of my essence.

This has all happened to me thousands of times, but this is the first time I've been present for the performance. As my seed rushes up my erection, my arms and legs go numb. My head feels light as even more fluid is pulled from there. My balls throb as my cock begins to pump its release.

Zahara's grin spreads even wider as she sees the fruits of her labor. Her eyes flash, like a cat's who just found the cream. Her delight is too bright. She's a shining star that twinkles down at me. The only reason I am tethered to this plane of existence is because she still has a hold on me. If she moves her hand from my dick, I'm sure I will fall, sink down into the depths of the tub, and drown.

It would be a good death. But I don't want to leave her. I want to be with her forever.

As I pump my last bit of seed, I feel as though I have died. But I am reborn.

A sweet heat remains as my dick goes flaccid in Zahara's hand. For the first time in my life, the beast has been tamed. The connection between myself and that piece of flesh remains. We are both content and sated.

For now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ZAHARA

The darkness surrounding me is thick and absolute. But I'm not afraid. It's the warmest, most safe place to be.

My body feels rested and relaxed. My mind is at ease from a dreamless sleep. My empty stomach is too content to growl and demand it be filled.

I feel... happy.

Such a strange feeling. I'm surprised to realize I haven't felt it in years. Have I ever truly felt it before?

I'm not sure. I'm starting to think I haven't.

No, I have never felt this bubbly sensation that makes me want to smile at nothing in particular.

Can't say that my toes have ever wiggled as though they couldn't wait to dance to a song that has no particular beat.

And my hands, they want to reach out and grasp at something. The desire to be full of that something is so enormous that it pulls my eyes open.

Having my eyes wide open is no different than being asleep. The darkness surrounding me in my wakefulness is also absolute. But I know where I am. I know whose body lies next to mine. I know whose hand holds mine.

Virius.

He sleeps like the dead beside me. Though his fingers are entwined with mine, he isn't holding on to me. I can't hear him breathing, because he isn't. Vampires have little need for air, only enough to circulate the stolen blood in their systems.

Slowly, bits of his features come into view. First, the bright blond of his golden hair. That, I can see clearly. But

the strong chin, the broken nose, the lush lips, those I can place only because they are ingrained in my memory.

I don't know this man. Not truly. But lying beside him, in the dark room, I feel closer to him than I have any other person in my life.

And just like everything I truly want for myself, I can't have him. Guilt stabs me in the chest—the thought that fulfilling my destiny will mean the end of his life. But I've been taught that the needs of the many outweigh the few.

Virius Serrano is just one person. Not even a person. He's a vampire. He's lived for hundreds of years. But by all accounts, not much of his life has been good.

I am a fool to think I'm doing him a courtesy by ending his miserable life. Because the last couple of days have not felt like misery. Not to hear him tell it. Not my experience of it with him.

The feelings of warmth and safety only magnify as I rest my chin on his chest. I still want to dance, only slower now. I want him to sway me back and forth in his arms as we try to outrun the clock of inevitability. I can't stop what's coming. Fate will have her due. All I can do is make the best of the time we have.

As I lie against his chest, straining to see more of him in the darkness of the setting sun, the smallest of inhaled whistles into Viri's nose. It happens only once in a few minutes. It proves he's alive.

My internal clock tells me that the sun is setting. So why isn't he up?

In the silence of the room, my stomach grumbles. My bladder also calls my attention. I extricate myself from my lover and head back to the bathroom to take care of the necessities.

Inside the bathroom, I turn on the light. The woman who looks back at me in the mirror isn't entirely unrecognizable. But she does look different.

Her hair is a rat's nest of tangles. Her lips are swollen from the long, endless kisses Virius gave after his hand job. I suspect he kept kissing me even after I fell asleep inside his arms.

I have a lover. A strong man who delights in my pleasure. A gentle giant who doesn't trust his own strength. I vow that, for however much time we have left, I'm going to show Virius nothing but pleasure. I'm going to show him nothing but kindness. I owe him that much.

I wrap myself up in his robe before leaving the bathroom. In the bedroom, I see he still hasn't stirred. But my belly is now demanding its due.

I slip out of the room, careful not to let any of the sun's setting light spill inside to harm him. That precaution wasn't necessary. There are no windows in the hall.

When I make my way back to the kitchen, I see that the sun has nearly set. Only a few rays straggle behind on the horizon, as though they are naughty children who don't want to be put to bed.

I startle when I see Hadrian Serrano standing to the side of the patio door. His hand reaches out to one of the rays. It burns the tip of his finger.

"Doesn't that hurt?"

He doesn't startle at the sound of my voice. Like shifters, vampires have excellent hearing. I'm sure he heard me coming from the hallway. Unless the bedrooms are soundproofed, he likely heard both Virius and me coming last night.

"Yes, it does." He brings his smoking finger back towards his body and studies it.

"Then why are you doing it?"

He lifts his gaze and regards me. "It reminds me of what I have to live for."

The fingertip heals instantly. Hadrian gives it a shake as though he just blew out a match. The sun has completely

receded down into the horizon, and only the moon's light remains.

Hadrian crosses to the refrigerator. He pulls the leftovers of a steak from the appliance's belly, and sets the dish before me, with a knife and fork.

"Thank you," I say, digging in.

"Once, I only thought about ways to die," he says, as though picking up on the end of a conversation I wasn't aware we were having. "That was when I thought I'd lost the love of my life."

I know he's talking about his sire, Domitia. I know that sadistic bitch didn't only whore out Virius. I heard she did atrocious things to Hadrian in the twisted name of love.

"You know Domitia used to rip my heart out. Literally."

Damn, so those rumors were true. I had assumed they were hyperbole.

"She got her hands around my heart, but she got her hooks in Viri's head. She's still in there." Hadrian knocked on the side of his head. "I need to know if you mean him any harm."

The piece of steak I'm chewing doesn't go down right. Hadrian pours me a glass of water and waits for me to clear my throat. Once I have my voice back, I tell him the truth.

"Virius is my destiny. It was foretold that we would be together."

"And have a child?"

I nod, not willing to say any more. Not willing to give anything else away, including the little time I'll have with Viri.

"You understand that prophecies are not always what they seem?"

So Virius has said. And I know that the Mayans predicted the end of the world—and that that date came and went a decade ago, and we are all still standing.

"He's signed over his stake in the vineyard to you," Hadrian continues. "As a mating present. Gaius and I are

prepared to do the same.”

This time I do choke, even though there’s no meat or water in my mouth. Hadrian watches me impassively. His shrewd gaze studies me like a predator waiting to see in which direction its prey will bolt.

I sit still. “Thank you for the gift. But it’s still Virius I need.”

A slow grin spreads across Hadrian’s handsome face. I suppose that’s the answer he wants, the answer that doesn’t make me out to be a gold digger. Little does he know it’s not gold I’m after.

“Take this.” He hands me what looks like a juice pouch, only the fluid inside isn’t filled with color dye and sugar. “Virius will be hungry when he wakes.”

I hold the blood in my hand and frown down at it. The white label at the top of it reads *B-negative*. Instead of the word *Volunteer Donor*, there is an emblem with a logo for Club Toxic on the bag. A woman’s name is printed in a cursive font. *Layla*, it reads, followed by the words: *flogged for thirty minutes*.

I know vampires need blood to live. I also know that the blood is a delicacy when endorphins are released in a human. One of the best ways to bring about that flood is through sexual pleasure.

“That’s his favorite,” Hadrian says. His lips are curled in a challenge.

I wolf down the last piece of the steak and slide off the counter. With the moon rising in the sky, I head back to the bedroom. Back to my man. Layla is left behind on the counter. Hopefully, her sweet blood will turn rancid and inedible in the room temperature of the kitchen.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

VIRIUS

I'm always up the moment the last ray of the sun sets. It's a habit from when I was first turned into a vampire. I knew my fate soon after I was sold to Domitia by my mother.

Domitia had always been a bit of a drama queen. There were rumors that she had tried to take the stage in Ancient Greece as a human. But when it was found out that she was a woman, she had been kicked off and then shunned. Her theatrical flares were then turned towards the men she turned.

I wasn't the first child she'd collected and groomed before turning. Clodius, whom Domitia had taken when he was a babe in arms, had a fear of beds. Even after he was turned into a lethal creature of the night, he slept standing up to ensure no monsters could reach up and grab him.

With me, Domitia liked to play a game of hide and seek. She didn't look for me with her eyes. When she found me, she didn't grab me with those razor-sharp nails of hers and say: *Gotcha*. No, she liked to hunt me with a torchlight so bright, I thought it was the sun.

I knew what the sun did to vampires. Each morning before I went to sleep, Domitia would send me off to dreamland with the promise of turning me in my sleep. In the evening, when I woke, she'd shine the bright torchlight in my face, making me think I was a turned vampire who would burn.

Now, every evening when I wake, slowly peeling open one eye to check for light, I can still hear her cackling.

Inside my bedroom, it is too dark even for shadows. Not a sliver of light has made its way inside. But I know I'm not

alone.

I can't see her, but I can smell her. Not the earthy scent of turned earth that always clings to her skin. Not the lush, sweet smell of a ripe grape. Not the musky scent of her wet cunny.

What I smell above all that is the sweet fatty acids, the bitter iron, and savory proteins of Zahara's blood. Hunger grips me. The few blood cells that remain inside me all rush to my gut. I have never had to fight against that particular organ before, as a vampire. The stranglehold it wraps around me is Herculean compared to my cock.

My dick doesn't rouse as I snatch Zahara from her post at the door. Her abundant curves are light in my arms as I toss her down onto the bed. She lets out a yelp of surprise. My hands are pinning her down before she can escape me. My dick remains tame, still sated, even with her sweet cunny so near. It's my fangs that have become the real monster. Those sharp points are the new beast that will take its due.

My fangs punch through my gums. The four points of pain don't bring me back to my senses. Zahara's wide eyes do.

They flash up at me—not one, but two suns shining on me in the night. Zahara's gaze is brighter than any torch Domitia ever used to bring on nightmares. I see the truth in Zahara's stare; I am the monster.

I release my hold on her. Once she is free, Zahara sits up. She reaches over to the nightstand and turns on the lamp there.

Soft illumination floods the room. But the glare of the light is too much for me. I move to the end of the bed, preparing to put as much distance between her and myself.

And I thought I could be a father? I can't control my most base instincts. Not my dick. Not my fangs. There is no way I can be trusted with a new life, even if creating one were possible.

Zahara's hand catches my wrist before I can get far. "Where are you going?"

I don't answer. I can't. Shame clogs my throat and clouds my eyes.

"To the kitchen?" she continues when I remain mute. "To grab a bag of Layla?"

I have to turn to her now. Her words aren't making any sense to me. What's a Layla?

"I don't want you drinking sex-spiked blood anymore," Zahara goes on. "If you're thirsty, you'll drink from me."

Either I'm asleep and dreaming the cruelest nightmare, or I'm awake and hallucinating. I'm not sure which I'd prefer to be true. Zahara is slipping out of her robe. Her naked body is revealed to me as she peels off the pieces of fabric. There is an ache in my loins. But the low levels of blood in my gut refuse to go any further south, so my cock can't rise to do anything about my mate's nakedness.

So, this is a nightmare then.

"I just nearly killed you," I finally manage some words.

"You mean when you tossed me on the bed?" Zahara moistens her lips, leaving behind a glossy grin. "I thought that was foreplay."

Not a nightmare. Perhaps a very vivid fantasy?

"You're thirsty," she continues. It isn't a question. "I'm giving you permission to drink me."

The pounding in my fangs dampens the throbbing of my cock. I move towards her. Slowly. Not because I fear I'll scare her. I'm scared of myself.

My need for this woman is great, so absolute. Every part of me wants a part of her. My teeth want to sink into her veins. My cock wants to thrust into her sheath. My eyes want to feast upon her loveliness. I need to touch her with my tongue, taste her with my hands, get the smell of her on my teeth.

"Spread your thighs for me, my wee kitten."

With only a hint of hesitation, which I suspect comes from the endearment and not my command, Zahara does as she's told. She opens to me. My gaze has trouble focusing as the heat of desire washes over me. The gates of Heaven are open to me. Two paths lie ahead.

The first gate is a set of double doors. The pink lips of her cunny are flushed red with the evidence of her desire for me. I could sink my tongue into her entrance and sate the cravings of my loins.

On both sides of the first gate sits the other set of doors. Her femoral arteries are the blood supply that is pumping in the blood fueling Zahara's sexual thirst I could sink my fangs into one of those thighs and sate my blood thirst.

She's offering me both. Where should I start?

I take a step towards her. My gaze flicks from her dripping cunny to the pulsing beat of the blood beneath her skin. I wrap a hand around her right ankle. With my rough tug, Zahara collapses flat onto her back.

I spread her thighs out, like a butterfly opening its wings. Using my thumb, I brush through the curls of her sex to find her bud. It's already swollen, filled with the essence she has offered me for my sustenance.

I swipe at it, rubbing her clit in tight circles. Once Zahara is purring from the attention, I give the bud a lick.

Just a taste. It is only the appetizer. And like all appetizers, the bite-sized sample of her clitoris does not fill me.

Slipping two fingers into her tight cunny, I pump my fingers in time to the blood rushing through her artery. In no time, she is trembling, crying out her pleasure to me. The moment I feel her walls clenching around my fingers, I sink my teeth into her thigh.

Zahara screams as I pull. The dual sensations are likely causing a duel inside her. The muscle-clenching pleasure of the orgasm. The piercing bliss that comes from my bite.

I can taste the change in her blood as the endorphins flood her system. It's the difference between taking no lumps of sugar in a cup of tea and drinking a little bit of tea leaves from the sugar dish. The saccharine taste of her doesn't rush to my head. It rushes to my groin. The beast wants in on the action. With my mind clear and my veins full, I can't fathom why that isn't a good idea.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I'm not sure how long I shake. I'm not sure how long I tremble. I can't remember a time when my body was still. When my insides weren't hot and clenching.

Why do people bother getting out of bed in the morning—or at any time of the day, for that matter? This is how I want to spend the rest of my life: having Virius Serrano bring me to orgasm with his mouth, his fingers, and now with his fangs.

I can't blame Layla the blood donor for volunteering anymore. Had I known the bliss of a bite, I would have lined up outside Club Toxic myself. But she can't have Virius' fangs. He's my man, and the hell if I'll share.

I look up at my man through glazed eyes. His lips are coated with a gloss of red. I grin to know it's my blood.

He licks at the droplets on his lower lip, but a sheen remains. It's not just my blood that paints his lips. It's also the result of my back-bending orgasm.

"I want more," I say. "I want all of you."

I reach for his dick. I expect Virius to step back, to grab my wrists and pin me down. I wouldn't have minded that. I've grown to like being overpowered by him. If another man or beast had tried it, I would have had their balls.

I want Virius's balls. I want them slapping against my ass as he thrusts into me. And I think I might just get my wish.

Virius doesn't pull away from me as I grab for Frankie. He leans into my touch. Maybe he'll let me give him another hand job? I'll settle for that tonight. But tomorrow he's going to have to give me the real deal. He won't have a choice.

Tomorrow night is the lunar eclipse. Neither of us can stop that celestial occurrence. And when it happens, the prophecy will be due.

But I don't want to think about that. I just want to think of him. I just want to make this man feel happy, to feel whole for as long as we have together.

Virius folds his large hand around mine. We are holding his shaft between us, together.

"I can't get you pregnant," he says.

"That's why I want you now. Because I want you. I don't want this to be about destiny or duty. I want it to be about me and you. Please."

His lids shut, and his body shudders.

"Please," I say again. "I want you."

Viri's lips capture mine. His tongue strokes against mine. I taste the metallic tint of my blood and the musky undertones of my orgasm. I am laid out on the bed with his large body covering mine. And still, it's not enough.

His long, cock is still in my hand. The width of him is so thick that my fingers don't meet as they wrap around his girth. Viri lets out a guttural moan as I try to angle him downward to my entrance. He shudders when my fingers graze the blunt tip of his cockhead.

There is a war waging on his face. His gaze is heavy-lidded with desire. His lips are pinched together with wariness.

I decide then and there I'm going to win this war. With my free hand, I give him a push. Like a large teddy bear, he rolls over to his back. Like the hunter I am, I mount my quarry.

Spreading my thighs, I straddle Virius. Though I've always been a flexible girl, the stretch to get my legs to span his hips is a bit of a challenge. But it's one I'm up for.

Viri looks up at me with wide eyes. His gaze is no longer heavy-lidded. It burns so brightly, it feels like the sun is on me.

I position myself over his groin. I could probably balance my full body weight on his erection. But that's not what I want to do with the stiff rod at my disposal. I want that monster inside me. And I want it now.

I rub my bare sex against the tip of his cock. He sucked my labia dry after taking my blood, but I am again dripping with need for him.

When I fit Viri's cock at my entrance, I have second thoughts. Even as I move my hips to adjust, I keep slipping to one side or the other, leaving a part of his thickness on the outside of my entrance.

Viri's jaw is clenched as he watches me. He doesn't stop me. His gaze is so clouded over with desire, I don't think he can.

Finally, after the world's slowest belly dance shimmy, I manage to fit the entire head at my entrance. The skin there protests as it stretches. But it doesn't hurt, not exactly.

The stretch feels good. It feels right. It feels like... destiny.

I lean over and kiss Viri. Still rubbing myself against him. Still trying to ease my way in.

"Zahara," he says in a hushed tone. "You are like sunlight."

"You haven't seen the sun in hundreds of years."

"My memories of it are nowhere near as bright as you."

I smile at that. A vampire called me his sun. A tear pricks my right eye, but I don't let it fall.

Whatever happens after this, I want to be with this man tonight. I want to give him what I've been saving all my life. I want to share my body with him. Not because I have to, but because I want to.

I sink down further. It's a series of fits and starts. There's nothing sexy about the mechanics of fitting Virius's big penis into my tight pussy. But as I descend down onto him, I feel like I'm rising.

He is a tight fit—so tight, I have trouble getting air into my lungs. Viri not only fills my channel, he also fills my mind; my heart. He's quickly tapping into my soul.

My body sinks lower onto his. I feel the veins on his cock against my walls. I feel the head pulsing. I feel his balls tightening against my ass as I come to sit.

His breath is my breath. His hands hold me tight. His eyes do not leave mine.

For all that I diss the spiritual, this feels like we're on a different plane of existence.

I am shuddering as he slides deeper into me. His hands come around me. He pulls me closer to him until there is not an inch between us.

I am his. And he is mine. The curtains close to block out any hint of the celestial bodies intruding in on us. But inside, I explode, and tiny shards of light dance behind my eyelids as I orgasm around the fullness of him. The fullness of me.

When the shuddering stops, I see that we've only just begun. Slowly, Virius withdraws his cock. It's only by a few inches, but it's enough to feel the difference. Then, for the first time since we've joined like this, he thrusts into me.

I shut my eyes but still see the light, just like a lunar eclipse where the moon moves into the sun's shadow. I had thought I was the sun. I now see I'm wrong. I'm only a moon shining in the light of his sun as the rays of his being fuck into me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

VIRIUS

I can't breathe, which isn't exactly a problem, as vampires do not need to breathe to live. We only need to replenish the blood in our veins.

Zahara's blood courses through my body. Her essence zigs and zags like a bolt of thunder. It radiates outward as it treks down my throat. It arrows into my arms and legs, making my fingers and toes tingle. When it gets to my chest, it expands the chambers of my heart, making the organ feel as though it will burst.

It's not my heart that bursts from the joy of having her inside of me. It's my cock that is ready to explode from being inside her.

I can feel every pull of flesh. Every give of tendon. Every clench of muscle.

And so, I don't breathe. If I take one more breath, I will burst open. Not just my cock, my whole being.

Because she is the sun: the thing every vampire craves, but can never touch for threat of death. Zahara will be the death of me.

I'm going to die because I can't keep my hands off her.

My heart is racing. Not because I'm exhausted or spent, but because blood circulates to reach every part of my body that demands more of her.

My mouth is dry. Not from physical hunger. I've drunk enough of her. But I want more. I need more. Not for sustenance, only for the pleasure of having her on my tongue.

My throat is thick. Not because I need air or food. Because there are words I want to say to her. But I'm not the poet in the family.

I wish Gaius was here. Although, if he was, if he saw my sun-filled kitten like this, I'd have to kill him. Then I'd never know what to say.

I held still while Zahara worked herself down and onto my length. She shudders and gasps as her orgasm takes her. The intimate massage of her muscles forces my eyes shut and once more, I see starlight. A million suns dance behind my eyelids. Zahara's sunlight penetrates not only my eyes but all of my skin. My bones. My very soul.

I'm certain I'm about to blow my load. It's the last thing I want to do. What I want to do is thrust into her—slowly, not the pounding beast I gave to the women who used me over all those years. To my surprise, my cock wants the same thing.

My balls relax... only a little. That tiny bit of retraction allows some give in my cockhead, and the swelling recedes... only a little. That small recession allows for more space in Zahara's channel, giving the length of my cock room to move... only a little.

Zahara is draped over my chest. Her head is tucked into my neck as she catches her breath. Shudders still wrack her spent form.

I move my hands down and cup the globes of her ass. When I lift her hips—only a little—her shoulders roll back. She doesn't lift her head, but her tight cunny grabs hold of my tip as though I'm a pacifier she's not ready to relinquish.

I have no plans to let this woman go. Not in this lifetime. I'll still be holding on to her in the next.

Slowly, carefully, I slide her down my length. The pleasure of it is exquisite and unexpected. I have never moved a woman onto my cock. I was usually chained to a wall or bed to give them a false sense of security. I was nothing but a beast to them, a tool to use.

Not so with Zahara. She wants me. And I—my dick, my fangs, my beating heart—all of the parts that make up who and what I am, they—we—I want her.

Zahara purrs against my neck as I fit her back into my lap. When she is flush against the base of my cock, her ass settled on my balls, I hear a click like a lock turning as we fit into the place where we were meant to join. Tiny pinpricks dot my back as she sinks her claws into me. I know there will be two moons decorating my shoulder blades when we're done. Those, too, are now a part of me.

I lift her again. Still slow. There is no urgency for me. We have all the time in the world. This is how I want to spend the rest of my days, with my cock snug inside this woman. Her arms around me. My hands cupping her ass as I make her scream.

As I pull her down back onto me, she throws her head back. Her eyes are closed. Ecstasy is written all over her face.

My chest puffs up to know that I did that. I put that look there. I'm giving her this satisfaction, this bliss.

For hundreds of years, I cursed my cock. Had I known what was in store for the two of us, I would have waited. I would have kept it under lock and key in a chastity belt until I met this woman. Remained the vestal virgin covered in pure white robes. And then I would have whipped it out and presented it to her on a sacrificial altar.

It's what she's done for me—except for the white robes. Zahara saved herself for me. She waited for me. And I let myself be defiled for centuries.

"I've fucked a lot of women."

Zahara's head wobbles as though I've punched her in the chin. Her eyes blink open to stare down at me.

"Most of the time, I didn't have a choice. Other times, I just let it happen because I didn't care. It didn't mean anything, because I couldn't feel it."

Her eyes flash before she blinks it away. But not before I see the panther lurking there. Not before I hear the low, threatening growl from somewhere deep in her throat.

"I feel everything with you."

To punctuate my statement, I dig my fingers into her ass and pull her snug to me. She groans low when I gain another half-inch inside her channel. I part her ass cheeks in an effort to spread her wider as I rock upward to gain the other half of that inch. Her muscles are already working themselves into a frenzy in preparation for the orgasm to come.

"I love you," I tell her before I lose her to her pleasure. "You are like sunlight to me; something I never thought I'd see again. Yet you shine down on me."

Her lips tremble. Her features crumple from the delirium of orgasmic bliss to something sad. At the corners of both her eyes, teardrops form.

"Am I hurting you?"

She doesn't answer.

I'm sure I've gone too far. I've pushed too deeply inside of her. She must be in pain.

But when I try to pull away, to pull my monster cock out of her, she clings. Zahara wraps her arms around me and buries her face in my neck at the same time as she wraps her thighs around me, locking her ankles at my lower back so that she cannot be separated from me at all.

I can feel the teardrops against my neck. They run down my chest. The tracks stop once they reach my heart.

Zahara presses herself against me. She tightens her thighs around my waist. She angles her hips until she is milking my cock with her tight sheath.

I answer her movements, using my hold on her ass to slide her up and down my cock. I can tell she wants to go fast. But the hell will I ever fuck this woman like those cunts from centuries ago. I want to feel every nook and cranny of Zahara. I want to know every part of her that she gives me access to.

Zahara's tears don't stop. They continue to fall as her orgasm takes her. With a gasp of pleasure, she finds my lips.

She trembles in my arms, around my cock, as she cries into my mouth, sharing her bliss with me.

I grip her to me as my balls release the motherload. I empty everything that I am, everything that I was, and everything that I hope to be, inside her tight channel.

As I do, Zahara holds me tight, her arms, her legs, her body a sheath around me as I experience a bodily orgasm for the first time in my long life. And for the first time in my life, when I come down from the bone-shuddering pleasure, I am left feeling whole.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ZAHARA

I watch Virius's chest as it rises and falls. Again, the movement is so slight that I find I'm holding my breath until his large pecs rise less than half an inch.

I've been like this all morning, barely blinking as I keep a vigil over his virility. His nostrils do not flare to bring in air. His lips do not sigh out upon exhale. Because he doesn't breathe.

Which means he doesn't snore. Which I guess is a plus. I have a lover who satisfied my body enough to knock me out, and is silent enough in sleep that I won't be rudely awakened in the afterglow. Instead of luxuriating in dreamland, I'm wide awake and watching for signs of life.

Intellectually, I know that he is a vampire and breathing is wholly unnecessary. It's his heartbeat that I'm watching. The organ keeps a slow and steady rhythm now that Virius's body is flush with my blood.

He is alive, though undead. He is strong, because of the life essence that I gave him. But he will die because of the life essence he's destined to give to me.

I brush a blond curl from his forehead. Some of the eyelashes that touch his high cheekbones are the same pale shade—a forest of light and shadows that cover eyes that hide nothing.

For the few days that I've known him, Virius has hidden nothing from me. He has shared everything that he has to give. Even the one thing he feared would hurt me.

Frankie rests fitfully under the blanket that covers us. Even in its flaccid state, Virius's manhood is longer and thicker than the average man's. It still baffles me that all of

him fits inside me. The soreness between my thighs reminds me that he did.

That soreness is a beautiful ache that I want to feel again. And then again. For the rest of my life.

An average-sized cock won't do. I'm not a size queen, as Virius called the women who abused him. It's not the size I care about. The old adage is true; size doesn't matter. It's how Virius uses his body that has me addicted.

Virius Serrano used his body to please me. To protect me. To love me.

I know that he found pleasure in me. Now I just need to find a way to protect him. Because my heart is telling me that I love this man.

His heartbeat speeds up, as though it just heard my silent declaration. I snatch my hand away from his chest.

He doesn't stir. He doesn't open his eyes. He doesn't reach for me—all of which makes it no easier for me to move away from him.

I climb out of the bed, but I can't tear my gaze away from him. His big body appears small in the bed. Vulnerable. He is the larger predator, but he's let a cat with claws into his home.

My fingers ball into fists. I feel sharp pricks against my palms as my nails dig into my own flesh. It takes everything in me to turn away from Virius, but I do.

I need to get out of here, but I'm naked. I could shift, but I feel too weary to make the transition. My panther has curled into a ball, as though she's mourning the loss of a mate. Panthers don't mate for life, but she doesn't seem to hear that. She sees Viri as hers.

Since I won't get out of here on four legs, I walk into Viri's closet on two. The clothing I find inside the walk-in curls my lip. It is a cosplayer's dream. Everything from breeches and waistcoats, to kaftans, to kilts, to a Zoot suit, to Armani.

I pull on a sari made of fine Indian silk, and pad out of the room.

It's late in the afternoon, by the position of the sun in the sky. A glance over at the clock in a sitting room confirms it. Outside a set of glass doors, the Serrano vineyards stretch as far as the eye can see.

This was once the land of my father's people: a small group of humans within the Tohono O'odham tribe who developed the ability to shift their shapes. But with a flourish of pen on parchment, the land was taken from them. Now, with a digital print out of documents, the land will be mine again.

That should thrill me. But it doesn't. Ownership of the land is only one aspect of the prophecy. The Serranos' signature on a deed can't stop what is coming.

Stepping outside, I take in a deep breath of the fresh air—and wince. There's a sickly sweet smell to the air. Like rotted fruit.

That is the other part of the prophecy. Long ago, my father's people angered the shifter god. He made it so that nothing would grow atop the soil until his anger was appeased. That would only happen when the Night Sun greeted the dawn. That night is tonight.

At the edge of the vineyard, I see movement. I go instantly into panic mode, thinking that it's someone from my tribe. But there are no red-headed jaguar shifters.

Marechal Durand is bent over a cluster of lush vines. I frown at the sight of my former employer, and the grapevine. The vineyard shouldn't be producing anything.

Marechal looks up with a grin when she sees me. "I think I've figured it out."

She holds one of the diseased vines in her hands. The white splotches along the roots and leaves cause me to wrinkle my sensitive nose. As a human, Marechal likely can't smell the decay that's killing the vines before they can bear fruit.

"I thought it was just root rot," she says, as though she's presenting findings to a committee. "But it goes deeper."

I want to say, *duh*. It does go deeper. It goes centuries deep, into a curse on my ancestors. Science won't cure this prophecy. Only a child born of a shifter and a vampire would break it. But I'm not going to bother to argue mystics with a degreed white woman.

To illustrate her scientific find, Marechal digs her hands into the soil. She places her sample in some kind of container and then holds it up to me as her evidence.

"Do you see?" she asks.

I don't.

"Too much fertilizer."

I might not know how to read the chemical symbols on the device, but I know what that means. Too much fertilizer in the soil can make vines grow leaves, but no fruit.

"There's too much nitrogen in the fertilizer," she continues. "It's as though the nitrogen is making the soil too dark for the plants to see the light. We just need to add phosphorous to help absorb the light. Then these little mamas will bear fruit next season."

Marechal turns back to her work. She takes another vial of chemicals out of the case. The label has a big P in black, covering the glass tube. Marechal pours some of the powder into the mixture. It bubbles and fizzes like a witch's brew.

I stand behind her. My legs can't move. My chest feels constricted. My fingertips tingle.

After a few moments, Marechal's face lights up. "See?"

I see that a reaction has happened, but I'm not sure what it is.

"It just needed balance," she continues. "This land has been untouched and left in the dark for years. All it needed was a little help to see the light."

"Are you saying the grapes will grow now?" I ask.

“Give me nine months, and I’ll have this place bearing fruit.”

Marechal grins brightly at her scientific achievement. I stand mute, questioning my very reason for being.

Gaius, Hadrian and Virius all said that prophecies never turn out as expected. Those three vampires are just as old as this curse. And all the parts of it are coming undone and being righted in unexpected ways.

If the land is now mine because of a pen stroke, and the grapes will grow and bear fruit because of chemistry... then maybe the prophecy is satisfied? Maybe... maybe it’s even wrong?

Maybe I don’t have to get pregnant?

Maybe I can keep Virius forever?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

VIRIUS

I struggle to awaken. Not because I'm tied down, not this evening. There are no binds that hold me to the bed as I wait to be petted by Domitia's newest client. My hands and legs are free. My body is my own. It's only the setting sun that weighs me down.

Still, I rise in defiance of the life-threatening rays. It's the first time I can remember waking up with a light, airy halo around my head. The first time that warmth courses through my chest. I think this is called happiness.

Though, when I turn in the bed, the source of my happiness is not with me.

I should panic. But I don't. I scent her nearby. She hasn't gone far. Even if she had, I would track her down.

Domitia bound me to her with her blood, with chains, and with words that mindfucked a child into submission. It wasn't until last night that I finally shook off the last vestiges of that bondage. Now, I'm bound to Zahara. But this time, I've cuffed myself.

I will gladly spend the rest of my life giving Zahara pleasure, fulfilling her every need and desire. Including giving her the child she desires.

It's a trudge to get out of the bed. There's likely a half hour of sunlight left outside. Inside my closet, I feel for the first garment on a hanger. I poke the correct body parts through the appropriate holes, and go in search of my woman.

Her scent trail leads me to the back of the house. A few rays of sunlight shine in from the glass doors that lead out to the vineyard. I step my way around those shards of death until I am on one side of the window.

Zahara sits in a cluster of vines. Her legs are folded beneath her. In her hands, she holds a diseased vine. Marechal is beside her. Scientific instruments are all around them.

I can hear what they're saying thanks to my supernatural hearing. But they're speaking in the unintelligible language of science, so their words go over my head. I don't bother to catch any of the discussion. I simply let the tone of Zahara's voice wash over me.

Even her voice is like honey as it enters my ears—which makes sense, since her kisses are like nectar. Between her thighs it tastes like the sweetest of wines. Her blood would shame the ambrosia of the gods.

The need to have her in my arms, her thighs wrapped around my neck, around my waist, is so powerful that I take a step towards the door. I hiss as the light shoves me back into the shadows.

"Just a few more minutes, and then we can go to them."

I don't turn at the sound of Gaius's voice. I sense him behind me, and am sure his gaze is on Marechal.

"Crazy what love does," Gaius continues. "It fills you with such want that it makes you forget your weaknesses."

"Have you learned any more about how Dom fathered a child?"

Gaius's pause lets me know that he has.

"Tell me," I demand.

"I don't know the answer. But I know where we can find Dom."

"Let's go," I say, eager to learn how to give Zahara the one thing I never thought I could.

"In a minute."

Gaius reaches for the door and pulls it open. The sun has set, thus lifting the barrier between the two of us and the women we treasure. Gaius is on Marechal in less than a breath. Both she and Zahara yelp at his sudden appearance.

Marechal giggles as Gaius brings her up into his arms for a deep and bruising kiss. Zahara blinks at the two of them. Then, as though only just sensing my presence, she turns to me.

I'm not certain what to do. Should I race to her? Bring her into my arms, and kiss her? That's what I want to do. But I'm uncertain if I should.

Hadrian made Cari a vampire and bound her to him in our ways. Gaius plans to do the same with Marechal, in time. I know that Zahara is mine, but I don't know how panther shifters mate. Wolves bite. I've already bitten her. That should stake my claim.

The thoughts flee my mind as a bundle of flesh is flung into my arms. Zahara removes all my doubts as she wraps her legs and arms around me and presses her mouth against mine.

"You're awake," she says against my lips.

"I would never sleep if I could touch you all day." I lick at her bottom lip, then graze the top one with my fang, marveling that I have the right to do so.

"Let's go back to your room so you can touch me all night."

She is beautiful in the blood-red of the moonlight. That's when I note the color of the night. It's the night of the lunar eclipse. The moon is in the shadow of the sun. Some of the sun's light passes through the satellite, but the dilution isn't enough to burn a vampire.

"There's something I must do first," I tell her.

Zahara's grin turns down into a frown. "Are we back to you turning down sex again?"

I press a kiss to her frown. "I won't be long."

"You forget that you're my captive," she says as she tightens her arms and legs around me. "You're supposed to do as you're told."

I grip her ass in my hands. My cock is ready to follow her command. To let her know that her request was heard, I

press her core up against the evidence. Her gaze immediately goes hooded.

"I promise I won't be long," I repeat. "Then I'll let you boss me around."

"You'll let—"

I capture her lips in another kiss. When she gasps, I invade her mouth. My tongue tangles with hers as though in a duel. If we had more time, I'd let her win. I'd let her have a taste of the control she thinks she wants. But I need to make this quick, and get the answers I need to give her what she truly wants: a child.

So, I suck at her tongue until she mewls. When she gives, I score the tip of her tongue with a fang. I pull at the droplet of her blood that pools there. It's only an appetizer. I'll be back for the main course as soon as possible.

When I set Zahara down, she wobbles. She clings to me, and I can see stars in her dazed eyes. I hold her until she regains her balance.

"Fine," she says clearing her throat. "You can go. But don't be long."

"As you command," I say, stealing another taste of her before I head off with Gaius.

I plan to follow that last order. I plan to learn how to give her the child she wants. Then she'll have everything she asked for. And it will be me who gave it to her, and not some fool prophecy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

VIRIUS

I press my fingers to my lips. The pressure of my fingertip causes a dam at the center of my bottom lip. On either side the blood backs up, waiting impatiently to rush into the divot.

Slipping my tongue beneath my finger, I lick at the skin there. I can still taste her on my lips. She's at the corners of my mouth as well. She is under my tongue. Her honey fills my throat.

Zahara is all around me. She is inside me. She is my entire world now. And I will give her everything she has ever dreamed of.

"We're here."

Gaius puts the car in park outside a club in downtown Tucson. The place doesn't share the same upscale class that clings to the velvet ropes of Club Toxic. But its dark decor still beckons those who seek the nightlife.

Inside, the layout is that of an actual club and not a BDSM cover. A bar sits in one corner. Tables and chairs dot the walls. The focal point of the room is the stage where musical instruments lie in wait for their masters.

A woman is on the stage. She runs her hands over each instrument. She doesn't strum chords or strike keys, but there is a hum coming from the stage, as though the music is eager to get out of her.

"Mama, listen."

Clanging and thumps ring out from the stage as a child bangs and thrashes the drum set. Surprisingly, the raucous is rhythmic and systematic. The child's playing sounds like what could be called music.

"You got it, baby. Rock on, Luci." The woman bobs her head in time to the music. Maternal pride is stretched wide on her face as she smiles at the kid.

"We're closed," says a male voice that carries as much bass as the drum set. "Show starts at ten."

"We're not here for the show," says Gaius, his trademark smile in place. "My brother and I are here to talk to you."

This must be Dom, I think, though I frown as I look at the man. He doesn't smell like a vampire. Not exactly. He doesn't entirely smell human, though I can scent the blood rushing through him. I hear it pumping through his heart.

The harsh breath of air he pushes through his teeth seems like a loss of more than his temper. Dom inhales, as though he needs the breath to make words come out of his frowning mouth. "Whatever it is, I'm not interested."

"What are you?" I say.

Dom turns his gaze on me. He might not be a full vampire anymore, but he is still a dangerous male. "I'm the man who's about to throw you out of here on your ass if you don't get your fangs away from my family."

I glance back at the stage. The beating of the drums has gone silent. The woman stands in front of the child. Her hands are balled into fists as though she will tear through us if we take a step towards them.

"He's yours?" I say, looking at the kid holding the drumsticks. "How did you do that?"

"If you're looking for the Sex Ed class," says the child's mother, "go across town to the middle school."

"Mama, what's sex ed?" says the kid.

Both parents wince at the inquiry.

"Kate, take him to the back, will you?" says Dom.

Kate wrinkles her features behind Dom's back. She digs in her heels as though she's reluctant to leave him alone with two vampires who could easily tear her and her child apart for a light meal.

"Now." Dom doesn't raise his voice. He also doesn't put any extra bass in the command. But it is unmistakably a command.

Instead of bristling at the order, a slight shiver shimmies across Kate's shoulders. It's the universal language of a submissive lowering her head to her Dominant's will.

"Come on, Luci. Daddy's got company to deal with."

Kate and Luci walk off the stage and head to the back. My gaze trails them. My heart pounds hard in my chest as I watch them go. That could be Zahara in a few years. I just need to find out how Dom did it.

"I need a child," I say.

Dom growls, sounding more like a lion than a man who is no longer a vampire.

"Not your child. I need a spawn of my own loins."

I point to my crotch area. Dom does not look down. He doesn't take his eyes off me. His body remains between me and Gaius, and the path his family took.

The protective instinct fascinates me. I never knew my father. Every man I came in contact with wanted to either use his fists or his cock to hurt me—every man other than Gaius and Hadrian.

Dom looks like he'd use his fist to rip my cock off and shove it down my throat if I dared take a step towards his mate or his child. A fire starts in my gut that tells me that I would do the same if anyone dared harm Zahara and her child.

No, *our* child.

I have never truly given any thought to having a child. Not even when I was human. I would never want to produce a living being who was born into bondage like I was.

Zahara thinks our child will be born with a job to do: to break a curse. But that would only be a belief. I've already given my land, my money, and my heart to Zahara. Our child would be born free to do whatever they wanted.

Born free. Made with love. That is something I'd like to create.

"How?" I ask Dom.

His gaze rakes over me. His stance doesn't relax, but his lips start moving. "It's a bloody business."

I shrug. My life has been nothing but blood and pain.

"I was drained by a vampire called Roxanna," Dom goes on. "She wanted to make me her minion, to do her bidding without a thought. She almost did."

"She must have known our sire, Domitia," says Gaius. "We were nothing but her pets when she wanted to play. Her executioners when she was hungry and bored. We broke free of her, but not without loss."

"Same here," says Dom.

"But you are no longer a vampire," I say. "You smell mortal."

"I am," says Dom. "Mostly."

"How?" I ask.

"Kate," he says simply. "I was near death after Roxanna drained me. Kate told me to connect with the spiritual sun. She insisted that my true essence would remain, that it was stronger than Roxanna's will. Kate was right. When I came out of it, my mortality was restored. So, I age."

Dom lifts his hand to indicate the gray streaks in his hair.

"What mortality I gained gave me just enough to create a new life and live out my days alongside my love."

"Is that all?" I ask.

I had expected a gauntlet filled with quests and challenges, and lots of blood and pain. But it appears that the way to regain my mortality is the same way I lost it: be drained of blood. But instead of being fed the blood of a vampire, I need to cling to a soul I'm not sure I have. That will be the tricky part.

"Is that all!" Gaius turns to me, his face contorted in anger and disbelief. "That's enough. It sounds like you could die."

If that's the cost to give Zahara what she wants, I will pay it. If I can make a new life that is born free, that is the legacy I want to leave to this world. It would make all the misery and pain of my long life worth it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Now that you’re rich, what’s the first thing you’re going to buy?” asks Carignan Durand.

Cari, Marechal, and I sit in the formal dining room. A spread of gourmet food is displayed across the table. Cari sips blood from a glass chalice. Marechal slices into frog legs in a buttery sauce then washes the reptilian fare down with a glass of wine whose cost would feed a small village.

I hold a silver spoon in my hand as I chew on *Boeuf Bourguignon*, which is rich people speak for beef stew. It has all the hallmarks of *hilachas*, a Guatemalan beef stew with tomatillo sauce. Except the tomatoes taste like spring in the fall time. The onions kick back. The spices hit my nose as if I’m pulling them straight from the ground.

Yeah, there really is a difference between how the wealthy and the rest of us live. And it’s being proven here at the dinner table. But I still don’t feel like I’m rich. I’m still wearing a borrowed dress, no shoes, and no underwear.

“It’s not like she needs anything,” says Marechal, sliding a small bit of meat into her mouth and then setting her fork and knife down as though she’s done.

I’m not judging, because I’ve eaten frogs before. But it was while I was in panther form. The creatures couldn’t even be called an appetizer, they were so small. I have no idea how she’s had enough. I’m on my second bowl of *bourguignon*, and eyeing the pot for a third helping.

“True,” says Cari, licking the blood from her upper lip. “She now owns this house, the land. I think Viri has a couple of cars in the garage. He’ll likely have a personal shopper

deliver a full wardrobe in the morning. Hadrian did that the first night we spent together.”

“I don’t need any of that,” I say, finally able to get a word in edgewise with the Durand sisters. For the last hour, they’ve been talking around me as though I wasn’t even there. But I probably have some fault in that. I worked for the Durands for years and was used to holding my tongue when my bosses spoke. But now I’m the boss.

“What do you want to do?” Cari sets her glass down. “Travel?”

I inhale as I think about it. The idea of traveling to places beyond the southern border of North America is an intriguing one. But it isn’t an immediate need. And it isn’t one I could have fulfilled any time soon.

There is still the nagging noose of the prophecy wrapped tight around my belly. I press my hand there now. The beef is going down well, but my stomach grumbles. It wants to be full, but not with life. It wants to be full with something else entirely.

“I want to go to school.”

There is silence after I speak the words. I shut my mouth, wishing I could take them back. I have never said them out loud before. But now, they’re out there. I cringe as I wait for the laughter to fill the ornate dining area.

“That’s so cool,” says Cari. “I was thinking of going back to school, too.”

“Where have you applied?” asks Marechal. “The University of Arizona is an excellent school.”

“I was going to get a history degree,” says Cari. “Specializing in the Dark Ages and the Renaissance, so that I can learn more about my husband’s past.”

“We have a relationship with the University of Phoenix,” says Marechal. “We donated a garden. So, if you need a recommendation...”

I look between the two women. There is no mirth on their faces. There is no frown of disapproval. No reminder

of the duty I'm destined to fulfill. There's only acceptance.

Oh, to be a rich white woman who thinks the world will simply bend its will to meet her needs.

But I'm not a rich white woman.

I'm a rich indigenous woman who now has the means to bend the world to her needs. Or had I forgotten?

The land of my ancestors has been returned to me. The vineyard will yield fruit in a year's time. The man who was meant to be the father of my child wants to spend the rest of his life with me.

I kinda have it all. There's nothing stopping me from going to college if that's what I want. There's nothing forcing me to have a child right now if that's not what I want.

I look out the window at the dark night. The moon has begun its process of moving in front of the sun. It's already casting a warm glow, heralding the commencement of a prophecy that has already been fulfilled.

Destiny always finds you? But I got here ahead of it. I've already passed the test and turned it in before the time was up. Shouldn't that get me extra credit? Shouldn't it at least get me out of the final exam?

"Let me know where you decide to go," says Cari. "Then I'll apply there too. We can be coeds together. But it'll have to be after I get my fangs under control."

Cari touches her index finger to one of her incisors. The sharp point pricks the flesh of her fingertip. A dot of blood escapes, which she promptly sucks away.

"I'm doing really well," she says with a grin. "I haven't bitten you, and your blood smells absolutely divine."

Cari inhales, her nostrils flaring. Her eyelids close and her long lashes touch down against her high cheekbones. She lets out a moan that sounds like a purr.

Before I can go on the defensive, Virius appears in the doorway. Cari clears her throat and throws back the last of

the blood in her wine glass. But I've already forgotten about the baby vampire.

Virius darkens the door, but there's a smile on his face. A look of absolute joy. I've risen and am in his arms before I realize I've moved.

I meant to ask him where he's been, what he was up to, what happened to bring that smile to his face when it didn't originate with him between my thighs. But the taste of his grin is so intoxicating that I find myself licking and sucking at his lips instead of making words.

Virius returns my kiss with vigor, with joy, with complete abandon. It takes a moment before I hear the throat clearing behind us. I open my eyes, but do not take my lips from Virius's mouth.

Gaius is looking down at us with complete and utter disapproval. I want to tell him that I have more class than to strip down and do it in the dining room. But there's a part of me, the part that splits my thighs into a V, that would beg to differ.

"Did you know about this?" Gaius asks.

I have no idea what he's talking about. In order to answer, I'll need to take my mouth from Viri's. I do so reluctantly. "Know about what?"

"In order to break the curse, he needs to die."

All the blood drains from my person. It goes so fast that my heart skips a few beats. When I look at Virius, he doesn't look angry. He wears the same open acceptance and wonder that he first regarded me with.

I know two things for sure at this moment. I know that Virius would die for me if I asked it of him. More importantly, I know that I will never ask it of him, even if it means others will suffer.

The reason why is simple; I love this man.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

VIRIUS

The flare of Zahara's nostrils confuses me. The deep crease that settles low into her brow baffles me. The lowering of her hooded gaze disorients me.

If I were to put all of those facial expressions together, it would lead me to believe that my mate is angry. But that can't be right. I'm giving her everything her heart desires: the land, the money, even the impossible child.

But then I look again. When I do, I see I missed a key feature that led me to the wrong conclusion.

On Zahara's cheeks, there is a deep red burn where the blood has pooled. That expression is one I know all too well. It is the look of shame.

Reaching out, I cup her face in one of my hands. Her skin is hot to my touch. Her eyes close like a loud door slamming in my face.

"You do not want my child?" I say. It is the only thing that makes sense.

Zahara's eyelids rise high. Her feline gaze flashes at me. That blinding light from the animal inside her shows not a hint of shame. That is definitely anger. "I don't want you to die."

"Oh." I smile, pleased at the vehemence in her tone at the potential of my demise. "It's not an actual death. I would simply lose my immortality."

Behind me, I hear Gaius grinding his molars. I know Hadrian has come into the room as well. He doesn't gasp his shock, but he vibrates with tension.

I can't spare my brothers any of my attention. My gaze never wavers from Zahara. She is the center of my universe.

I watch as the sunlight within her continues to wax and wane. Clouds move across her gaze as though a storm is only moments away. This storm won't be a light spring sprinkle. This promises the torrential rains of a hurricane.

"What is he talking about?" says Hadrian.

"We went to see Dom," Gaius answers. "Apparently, the vampirism can be reversed."

"How?" says Marechal.

From the corner of my eyes, I see Marechal go into Gaius's arms. Gaius's arms move slowly around her. But once he has Marechal in his embrace, it's as though the lead has left his body and he radiates warmth around her.

The same happens when Cari goes to Hadrian.

"Dom, another vampire, was bled dry," Gaius says. "He survived by reconnecting with his soul, or the light, or some such woo-woo nonsense. I don't know. But his mortality was restored."

"Bleeding?" says Zahara. "No one said anything about bleeding."

"So you did know," Gaius accuses her.

"I knew..." Zahara clears her throat and closes her eyes. When she tries to raise her gaze, it falters. When she tries her voice again, it is only a whisper. "The prophecy indicates that he would die before the child is born."

She raises her gaze now. The sorrow in her eyes nearly knocks me down. A tear pools at the corner of her eye. I catch it before it can fall.

Another joins the first. And then another. I cradle Zahara's face in my hands and let the tears fall.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"I will not die," I say, leaning my forehead against hers. "I've been dead all my life. The first time I ever felt alive is the moment I met you."

Zahara presses her lips together. She looks as though she's struggling to let words out. Or keep them in. I'm not sure which.

"You are my destiny, Zahara. If I was born simply to spend a few days loving you and then die giving you a child, that time will be a life well-lived."

"No," she says, the single word a forceful gale against my lips. "I do not want this destiny. I do not want this child. I just want you."

"You have me."

"And I'm keeping you. You are mine. Mine."

I cannot stop the grin that spreads across my face. This wee little kitten was right. I am her captive. I will happily bind myself to her for the rest of my days, however many they are.

"You gave me the land. Marechal figured out what's wrong with the vines. As far as I'm concerned, this prophecy is fulfilled."

"But the child?" I say.

"I don't want a child."

I wince at the vehemence in those words. It's clear she means it. The little cherub I've been dreaming of since the car ride home, the little boy with her dark hair and my light eyes—in my mind, I see him crying at his mother's rejection. I see him shoved out of the room as his mother takes another male to bed. I see him sitting on the street, begging for a crumb of bread because there is no one in the world who cares about him.

"I want this child," I say.

In my mind's eye, the little boy looks up. Something sparkles in his eyes. It's faint, but it's there. It's a small light of hope.

"Well, you're not putting it in my womb."

Zahara lifts her chin in that defiant pose that made me hard just hours ago. For the first time, I do not stir below. She steps towards me, shoving a claw-tipped finger into my chest. The point of it is a dagger in my heart.

"And if you dare think of sticking Frankie into any other woman—"

“Who’s Frankie?”

“—I’ll claw her eyes out. Her tits, too.”

Zahara turns on her heel and heads to the glass door of the patio. I take a step to follow, but she growls at me.

It’s not a low warning growl. It’s a growl of pure menace. One that says: *fuck with me and I’ll take a bite out of you.*

By the Fates, I love this woman.

Zahara opens the door and steps out. She reaches down and lifts the hem of her sundress up and over her head. I want to growl at my brothers to avert their gazes from her nakedness. But I am left speechless as her body begins to transform.

The smooth skin I love to kiss grows dark fur. The heart-shaped mouth that leaves me drunk, elongates into a muzzle. The tall, proud woman goes down to all fours as she shifts fully into a black panther.

She is magnificent. She is beautiful. She is mine, and our children will be perfect.

As though she can hear my thoughts, my panther growls at me again. This time, she flashes teeth. I have half a mind to challenge her to a fight, just so that I can tackle her to the ground and show her that I will not be budged from my position.

But I know my little warrior. She needs to believe that she is in control of this situation. So I drop my gaze as though in submission, and allow her a head start before I chase after her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

My stomach turns in knots as I run through the vineyard. Even though I've just eaten two helpings of the fancy beef stew, my stomach feels empty. That's why it's grumbling and hissing as my paws strike the ground. That is the ache that needs to be filled.

The moon's light shines down upon me. Its rays feel warm tonight, like the light of the sun. I shrug off the light for the shadows.

I don't want to be anyone's light. I want the darkness around me. If the prophecy can't find me, if it can't see me, then it won't happen.

So what if the thought is childish? I've been treated like a child all my life. Every decision has been made for me by those who thought they knew better. Well, they'll just have to deal with this tantrum because I am about to raise hell in the middle of the mall. Too bad I'm alone in a vineyard.

I scent the prey at the far edge of the vineyard. Deer are typically a nuisance for the foliage that grows on the vineyards. Too bad this deer decided to come in for a late-night snack when a pissed off panther was on the prowl.

I move silently towards it. The creature is yards away from me. It doesn't scent me yet, but it does sense me.

Its ears twitch. Its mouth pauses in chewing the leaves it's stolen. My leaves. This is my land.

As though my anger is a living, breathing thing, the deer appears to sense it. I stay in place, holding still. Unlike other predators like wolves, my kind doesn't chase their prey until they tire. I wait until the deer is within range, and then I pounce.

I leap into the air, springing nearly fifteen feet to close in on the kill. My claws extend. My front paws grasp around the animal's shoulders. I'm preparing to rip out its neck when I notice an unexpected scent. The sweet scent of mother's milk.

I have a doe in my clutches. She has milk in her breasts. Somewhere nearby, there is likely a gangly-legged Bambi watching this murder go down.

I retract my claws and let the doe go. She hobbles off into the night. The trail of her blood might make it easy for another predator to track her down.

There's nothing I can do about that. She had been set in my path. If it's her destiny to die tonight, then I can't stop it.

What I can do is stop the death of the man I love. Whether he likes it or not. There will be no Bambi for us. Despite what he thinks, despite what everyone thinks, there's no need.

The prophecy has proven it doesn't need to be followed to the letter. The land was restored to its rightful owners without any bloodshed.

Well, technically Viri did bite me. But I allowed it. Hell, I want him to sink his fangs into me again, and soon.

The berries will produce. That's all thanks to science and not magic. Which has to mean that my loins don't need to bear any fruit. Which has to mean that Virius doesn't have to die.

At the entrance to the caves, I shift. I walk into the underground clearing on two human legs. On the walls hang robes in white and light blue—the colors of Guatemala, where many of these women are from. Those original descendants of the Tohono O'odham who went down south from our ancestral lands dress in jeans and blouses instead of the manatees and moccasins of the old days.

I pull a sheath over my head as I proceed deeper into the belly of the cave. The women are gathered in clusters. I

note that the clusters don't resemble the two factions of days ago. Itzel and Zuma have their heads bowed together as they speak in hushed voices.

When I look closer, I see that they are standing around a raised altar. A large, drab, gray stone decorates the dais. Four sets of chains and manacles hang from each corner.

"What the actual fuck?"

All gazes turn to me. Only a few of those pairs of eyes then cast downward in shame.

Itzel's flash in exasperation. "Where is he?"

"Is that for him?" I demand, ignoring her question. "Is that for me too? Did you expect us to do it out in the open for all of you to watch? What the hell do you think this is? Some *Eyes Wide Shut* crap?"

Itzel stares at me mutely. I should have known she wouldn't know the erotic film about rich white people. Itzel feels that all media is twisted history. Zuma, on the other hand, smirks at the reference.

"Where is the Night Son, Ixazaluoh?"

"He's not coming."

Itzel sighs. Once upon a time, her disappointment would snap my butt into action. Not tonight.

"I won't let him die," I say.

"You cannot escape destiny."

"Destiny can go to the devil. I've already fixed everything." I step up to the dais, making sure to avoid the chains so that everyone can see and hear me. "Viri signed over the land to me. It's ours again. Marechal Durand figured out what's wrong with the vines. The soil just needed the right fertilizer. So you see, everything has worked out. We got everything that we wanted."

A low murmur goes through the gathered women. The hum sounds hesitant, uncertain. I don't blame them. We've all been on this path for decades, but now it's over. We can all stop this quest, and start to live our lives.

I can live my life. With Viri. While going to school and becoming... whatever I want to be.

"That does not fulfill the prophecy," says Itzel. "The gods demand the child."

"Well, I don't want to get pregnant. And you can't make me."

My womb is my own. My body is my own. The only thing I'm willing to give up is my heart. It's back on the surface with Virius, who I know is coming for me. I'm surprised he let me get this far without giving chase.

"It's not up to you, child," says Itzel.

"I'm not a child," I hiss.

Itzel reaches her hand up to my face and cups my cheek. A shiver goes through my spine at her touch. How had I not noticed before how leathery her fingers feel? How had I not noticed before the frown lines in her lips?

I don't get a chance to think over any of that now. A sharp pain explodes at the back of my head. I have just enough time to see Pia over my shoulder. She shrugs apologetically as I begin to slump. The last thing I see is the rock in her hand. The last thing I think is to pray to the gods that Virius stays away. But in my heart, I know he won't.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

VIRIUS

“*Y*ou’re not going after her.”

I look down at the hand clasping my arm. Gaius’s fingers are elegant, though I know the excruciating torture they are capable of. For years, I watched him bind and thrash humans to within an inch of their lives before drinking from them, or executing them during the Inquisition. I stood right alongside him, doing the same work. Though my fingers still appear stained with blood.

“It could be the end of you if you go through with this,” says Gaius.

I am touched that he cares. Only he and Hadrian have ever cared for me. For centuries, I have been a satellite in their orbits. Zahara is my sun.

“I have to,” I say. “She is my destiny.”

Hadrian steps up to the other side of me, boxing me in. “Please, brother. Let’s just take a moment to think this through.”

Instead of fighting either of them, I wrap an arm around Hadrian’s shoulder. With the other, I embrace Gaius. The two men hold me tight, as though they won’t let me go. But I know the words to loosen their hold on me.

“If Carignan or Marechal asked this of you, would you not find a way?”

I miscalculated. The bonds my brothers had around me increase as Cari and Marechal join in the group hug. The two women have never touched me before. I can’t blame them, as my abuse always made me leery of women.

But this affection from them, I understand. They are my family. Like Gaius and Hadrian, they aren’t going to let me

go without a fight.

"I'm going to go after her," I say inside the cocoon. "She and I will talk about this matter between ourselves. And then we'll fill you in on our decision."

There is some reluctance. But slowly, each man and woman begins to loosen their hold. Gaius is the holdout.

"Be home before dawn," he says. "If not, I'm coming after you with my belt." He says the words with a sardonic grin, so I know that on some level, he means it.

"Yes, Dad." I grin.

He cups my chin and gives me a fierce look. I turn from him, and I'm gone. Out the door and on my panther's trail.

I figured she would head back to the caves, back to her own family. But her scent is strong in the vineyard. I see her tracks in the soil, along with a deer's. So my kitten decided to take her anger out in a hunt.

Following the signs of the hunt, it's clear that Zahara overtook the deer. There is a clear sign of struggle in a clearing. However, the deer's tracks go off in one direction. Zahara's take a turn in the opposite direction.

So, she changed her mind? Perhaps that means that her anger has abated. A good sign for me.

I follow her tracks, which lead me to the cave entrance. For the second time in less than a week, I enter this place of my own free will. The first time had been to rescue Gaius from these shifters. Along the way, I had scented Zahara's sweet heat. When I came face to face with her, I knew that she was mine.

I scent that same heat now. She is here, amongst these women, in the sea of long dark hair and honey-brown skin. But I don't see her.

"Aren't you the valiant little knight, come to save the Indian princess," says a croaking voice.

My heart stops when my gaze lands on the white-haired woman. Her smile is proprietary, as if she owns me. Her gaze is calculating, as though she weighs my worth. I am a

poor boy begging on the streets of Rome again, and Domitia has come for me.

But this isn't Rome, it's Arizona.

I'm not on the streets. This is a cave.

And this woman isn't Domitia. It's Zahara's kin: Itzel.

"You know this won't be one of those mouse movies where the white man subdues the natives and takes the princess?" says Itzel.

"Mouse movies?" I ask.

"She means Disney," says another woman. She is the cougar I saw arguing with Itzel days ago.

The cougar eyes me in the proprietary way of the women Domitia would hire to use me. I have the urge to cover myself as the cougar's gaze travels lower. Instead, I straighten to my full height in the cramped cave. She might look, but I will only ever touch Zahara.

"Excuse me." I snap my fingers. "My eyes are up here."

The cougar's face breaks into a grin. "I like him."

"Too bad," says Itzel. "He's only good for one purpose."

"I've come for Zahara," I say, not wishing to be a part of this conversation any longer. I've said all I need to say to these two, and used up all the good manners Gaius taught me.

"That you certainly will do," says the cougar.

"Zahara will be with us in a moment," says Itzel.

She circles around to my back. I feel I should keep an eye on her. But she's a small woman. There's no physical damage she could do to me. But she could make things difficult between me and Zahara.

"Come, have a seat." Itzel points to a raised slab of stone.

My feet hesitate after I've taken the first step towards it. The slab reminds me of the dungeons in one of Domitia's castles. She liked to chain me up in the basement for the use of her clients. I could easily have broken the chains, but it was the psychological enslavement that Domitia got off

on. And the chains made the wealthy women who sought my favor feel that they held all the power.

"I'll just go to her room," I say, taking a step away from the stone altar.

A sharp pain rakes across the back of my head. I look over to see that the cougar has struck me with a rock. She struck me hard, because I can see blood staining on the rock's surface.

The blow dazes me, but it doesn't bring me down. What does bring me down is the dagger to the chest. Itzel is on me as I fall to the ground. In the space of one moment, I have three thoughts.

My first thought is not to crush the old woman who is Zahara's relative.

My second thought is how unlike Zahara this woman looks and feels.

"Now you'll bleed." Itzel's voice sounds far away. "And when you're close to death, you will give us the child, and the gods will be appeased."

Bleed? Child? Gods?

My last thought is: why? I would have given Zahara this. I would have given her my life if it meant she would have the child she wanted. She didn't need to take it.

But what had I expected? I was born a slave. As I'm dragged to the altar and my wrists are shackled in chains, I know the answer to my last question: it's fitting that this is the way I'll die. It's exactly as I've lived my life. In bondage.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ZAHARA

“Wake up, Zahara.”

Everything aches. My head. My arms. My legs. Even my eyelids. So, naturally, opening my eyes is the last thing I want to do.

“Zahara, you have to wake up.”

I slap at the hand shoving my shoulder. My fingers come away wet. When I open my eyes, I see blood on my claw tips.

I’m halfway through a shift. My panther feels like it’s trying to leash the human part of me that wouldn’t wake.

Pia stands over me, cradling her forearm. Blood seeps through her fingers. Her mouth is pursed, as though she’s holding in her canines.

The word *sorry* doesn’t enter my brain. The last thing I remember about Pia is the blow to the head she dealt me. I growl at her, preparing to give my body over to the panther to exact revenge for that cheap shot.

“Hey,” she says, holding up her bloody hands. “We can settle that score now. Or, you can deal with the more important matter at hand.”

The only matter at hand is whooping the ass of this traitor and then getting the hell out of here to find Virius.

“The ritual has begun.”

I blink a few times. Ritual? “It can’t start unless...”

I can’t bring myself to complete the sentence out loud. The ritual can’t start unless Virius is here. Which means he’s here.

Of course he’s here. I knew he would follow me. In trying to get away from him, in trying to save his life, I led him right into the trap that would kill him.

“We have to hurry,” says Pia.

“We?”

“If I hadn’t taken you out, Itzel would’ve likely chained you to the altar to wait for him. Then you’d be helpless beside him.”

I know time is of the essence, but I have to ask. “Why are you doing this? You tried to let Virius escape that first day. And now this. Why?”

“This isn’t the way,” says Pia. “I’m all for preserving our history and ways, but this? The virginal sacrifice and lambs to the slaughter bullshit, that needs to stay buried in the past.”

“Right!” I agree.

Pia and I stand there in a moment of new age, feminist solidarity. Instead of doing a fist bump, I grab the handle of the door. I still have to get out there and rescue my man like the modern heroine that I am.

We turn out of the room and walk on silent feet down the narrow corridor. My palm presses against the cold, hard stone of the walls. My ears strain for any sign of Virius. I don’t hear his deep baritone, but I do smell his unmistakable scent.

“He’s not looking so good,” says Zuma’s voice.

Peering into the clearing, I see Zuma standing over the slab. Lying prone on his back is Virius. His eyes are closed. His sun-kissed skin looks pale. His large body looks sunken in.

“Maybe you should back off a bit there, Itzel. We don’t want him to die.”

“That is his destiny.” Itzel tips a bucket on the floor towards her.

I see red. The red of Virius’s blood drips from a wound in his wrists into the bucket. That isn’t his only wound. There’s a stake in his chest. They put a fucking stake into his chest.

I’m preparing to charge forth, but something holds me back. Pia.

It takes everything in me not to lash out at her. Looking into her eyes, I see what she's trying to say. We need a plan. There are twenty shifters watching the events unfold on that dais.

Some wear stoic, unfeeling faces. Most of the gazes are averted from the scene, as though they can't stomach the ritual either. But the stoic faces still outnumber the two of us who are ready to spring into action.

"Um, I know it's been a long time since you've gotten any," Zuma is saying. "But cocks don't stand up if the john they're attached to can't."

"The gods demand a sacrifice," says Itzel, pressing the wound on Virius's chest.

The blood flow from there has stopped. Oh Fates, is he already dead? Am I too late?

"Yeah, a sacrifice," says Zuma. "That's why he's chained to the altar. But he still needs to perform to get Zahara knocked up. Hell, with what he's carrying in his pants, he could knock us all up with one blow."

Zuma's fingers lift the waistband of Viri's pants. That is the last straw for me. Hell no is that bitch eying my man's package.

I break free of Pia's hold, no longer willing to think over my next steps. I am pure rage and aggression. But before I can get to Itzel or Zuma, the entire cave shakes.

Rocks rain down over everyone gathered inside. Three figures appear at the cave's entrance. With the shifters' gazes focused on the newcomers, I make my way to Viri on the altar.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

VIRIUS

The darkness all around is deep, absolute. Not a shard of light is present in this new existence.

Nor is there any movement. My body is paralyzed, both inside and out.

I can't feel my toes or fingers. I can't part my lips to speak. I can't peel my eyes open to see. Even my ears seem closed off to any sounds.

My chest lies still. I have no heartbeat. Fitting, as I am drained dry. There is nothing inside of me that needs to move around.

Not blood. Not air.

I am dead.

I don't like that thought. I don't want to be dead. Not yet. There is something I must do before I die.

With that thought, I feel a twitch. Just a tiny stirring down below. Barely a blip on the radar of what's left of my consciousness. It's enough to warrant notice.

I can't lift my head to see what is touching me. I couldn't open my eyes even if I were able to. I can't defend myself if I have to.

The stirring becomes movement. Still only a slight shifting. But there is definitely something perched on my skin. My upper leg, I think?

Whatever the creature is, it leaves behind a wet trail on my cool skin as it progresses onward. Perhaps it's a worm?

No, not a worm. I'm starting to perceive girth as I differentiate its heat from my balmy flesh. Maybe a snake?

But no. It's not a snake. I can't perceive any scales as it continues to writhe on me.

The movements are definitely snake-like. Not a garden variety snake. Much more like...

Like an anaconda.

Awareness flashes at me in the darkness. A tiny pinpoint of light.

"Frankie?"

My words are not spoken out loud. They're said in my head. They're spoken in her voice.

Zahara called my cock *Frankie* on more than one occasion. I remember now. She thought I would put Frankie into another woman. Her wee claws had come out at the possibility. Fire had flashed in her cat eyes.

That light flashes in my mind now. I can't make out her features. But I know she is that light.

Down below, Frankie pulses again, as though he knows the light in my mind is the only woman he has ever craved. The only woman who has ever brought us both any pleasure. The woman who brought me and my dick together in the same body.

I wasn't able to get it up for two centuries. Not until Zahara came close and shone her bright light upon me.

But if Frankie is getting hard, maybe she is around?

As if in answer, my cock pulses again. It's only a light pulse, likely because there's barely a drop of blood in me. And anything I have is being diverted down south.

I'm going to need some of that blood diverted back up top. I need to think. If she is nearby, I need to get to her. I need a plan.

If only Gaius were here. He is the thinker in the family.

"If my brother is dead, I'm going to have myself a new jaguar coat."

The threat is said in Gaius's cultured voice, though it's gruffer than I've heard in decades. It harkens back to his street thug days.

"Gaius, that is really culturally insensitive; threatening to take the—well, fur—of a Native American shape-shifter. Or,

wait? Is it Amerindian ? Or maybe American Natives? I don't think we learned about indigenous people further south than Mexico in school?"

That's Cari's voice. For the short time that she's been in our family, she's been trying to help me with my clothing. Apparently, sometimes the way I dress is offensive to others.

"My apologies if I was offensive in threatening to do bodily harm to the elderly female jaguar shifter who staked and bled my brother to a painful, gruesome, and bloody death. Is that polite enough for you?"

"Well," says Cari in the patient voice she uses with me when I've gotten something wrong, "you didn't need to bring up her age."

"Shut it, both of you! I don't have time to deal with your colonizer-guilt."

Zahara's voice washes over me like sunlight. She sounds closer than the others. She sounds like she is a star just over my head. I want to reach out and touch her.

"Not a colonist," huffs Gaius, his cultured Italian firmly back in place.

"Second-generation French-American," mumbles Cari, with a soft lilt to her words.

There's a part of me that wants to point a finger at their flubs. Usually, I'm the one saying the wrong thing and causing discomfort to others. Unfortunately, I still can't lift a hand or open my mouth.

"Viri, can you hear me?" says Zahara.

Words bubble in my throat with no way to escape.

I try to part my lips. They don't budge.

I try to open my eyes. The lids are heavier than boulders.

I try to lift my hands towards her, but even if I could move, I'm not sure where to reach. The darkness cloaks me. Its cold tendrils snake under me. They close around me, like a mighty anaconda readying to suck the life out of me.

"Viri, I need you to open your eyes."

I want to. Fates, do I want to see her face again. I want the bright light of her gaze to warm me from this bitter cold.

"I need you to come back to me, Viri."

I want to tell her that I'll never leave her. Even if I must leave this world, my ghost will haunt her. I am the moth. She is the flame. If I die, it will be because her light burned me up.

"Viri, I love you."

My brothers had tried to explain how powerful those three words were. They had only ever been letters to me, and I was never good with my letters. The statement is made up of vowels, giving them a soft sound.

Those three syllables land heavily on my ears. They sink into my heart with a thud. They fill my lungs with a whisper of air. They move the dark clouds from behind my eyelids. I know my eyes are still closed, but on the other side of my lids, I begin to see the light.

The hardest part is lifting my eyelashes from their resting place on my cheekbones. It takes all my might to raise them just a fraction. But it's enough. Through the hairline bars of my jail cell, I see the light dawning.

I see the bright beam of light that is Zahara. I reach for the light.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

He's still. He's so very, very still.
I watched Virius in his daytime coma-like sleep more than once. His chest always rose and fell—eventually. His nostrils always flared with the intake of breath—eventually. His arms would come around me and pull me close to him—always.

Looking down at him, I see he is pale, lifeless. His chest is sunken in. His proud nose looks as though it has collapsed. His arms are inanimate objects at his sides that do not rise to take hold of me.

"Viri, can you hear me?"

I wrap my arms around him. He is cold to the touch. Not like ice. More like that flabby cold when a limb goes numb. I rub his skin vigorously, trying to get warmth back into him.

"Viri, I need you to open your eyes."

There is a flutter of movement. Not in his eyes. I turn my gaze away from his face and look southward.

Yes, there it is again. Movement in his pants. The front of his pants writhes and coils slowly, like a snake.

It's Frankie. Frankie is alive and well. That has to mean Viri is, too.

"I need you to come back to me, Viri." I place my hand on his groin. It pulses under my touch. But only once. Still, it's enough to let me know he's there.

A gasp goes through the gathered shifters and vampires. I don't care what they think. I only care about him, and if this will stir him enough to bring him back to me, then so be it.

"Viri, I love you."

“He needs blood,” says Gaius. “We need to get him home and get him a blood bag.”

A growl rips through the cave. The sound is so terrible and fearsome that every shifter—including Itzel, who is in Hadrian’s grasp—drops lower and shows their neck. I look around for the source of the monster, only to realize the roar came from me.

“He drinks no one but me,” I say before tearing a fang into my wrist.

Another gasp goes through the gathered shifters as my blood drips onto Virius’s lips. I pull his lips apart to get more of my life-giving essence inside of him. Hell, I’ll rip open my heart if it will bring him back to me.

His lips wrap around my wrist. The tip of his tongue slides across the slit of my wrist. Its velvety smoothness against the flesh of my veins is just as erotic as when he suckled on my intimate flesh. It’s more satisfying because it’s a sign of life.

And then, finally, he pulls.

His chest rises. His nostrils flare. His hand rises, and he presses my wrist to his mouth.

His eyes do not open. However, he continues to pull from me.

“Viri, that’s enough,” says Gaius.

He doesn’t hear, or he doesn’t listen. He pulls again.

“That’s not what’s supposed to happen,” says Itzel. “That bloodsucker is going to kill her. They both need to live, for the child.”

I want to laugh at her protests. If I do decide to have a child, it will not be born with a job. It will not be born shackled to a fate it has no control over, like both its parents.

That’s only if we both live. Because if Virius doesn’t come back into the light, I will live the rest of my life in complete darkness. How could I not, when he was my source of warmth?

But it would seem that will not be my fate. It will not be our fate.

Virius will not die. I feel that as he pulls at me again. I feel my life going into him, bringing him back to life. In return, I feel myself dimming ever so slightly.

One more pull, and I'm sure I will faint. I don't try to tug my hand away. I don't try to stop him.

I had planned to take his life from this man. But in the short days that I've known him, he's given me a reason to truly live. If this is the cost, I'll pay it. I'll give him my life.

I take a deep breath, likely the last one I'll ever take, and wait for the next pull.

Viri's eyes flash open. They are no longer dark. They flash back at me, like a cat's.

His smile is bloody. "There you are."

"There you are," I whisper as I press my forehead against his.

"Everything went dark all around me. But then there was a tiny spark of light. It was you. You are my sun. You've set me free."

I cup his cheek in my hand. The warmth is returning to him now that my blood is in his veins. He is alive. Like, truly alive. That metallic note of vampire is fading from his skin. Not entirely, but mostly.

"What will become of the prophecy?"

I raise my head to see Itzel. Gaius's hold on her hasn't slipped. She doesn't appear to care about her life. All she's ever cared about is the damn gods, not the flesh and blood woman that I am.

"As I told my mate, prophecies are rarely what they seem," says Virius, his voice still reedy from his near death. "But with this one, it looks like everyone got what they came for. So we'll call it even. Let her go, brother."

Gaius's fingers twitch around Itzel's neck. He takes in a deep breath. Then he looks at me. He's giving me the choice.

"It's your land," Gaius says. "They're your people. It's your say."

I don't hesitate. I know exactly what I want to do. I turn to the women who have been there all my life. They raised me to think I was something special. They taught me to fight, to take care of myself. But they never allowed me to define my own destiny.

"Go home."

A bristle runs through the crowd, much like a cat who's had her fur rubbed the wrong way. My words aren't directed at the crowd. They're directed at Itzel.

"I've listened to your words all my life," I say. "And they nearly killed me, and the man I love."

I look to Viri, who has sat up on the makeshift altar. The wounds on his chest and wrist are healing slowly. Not as fast as they would normally, but I can see that his life is no longer in jeopardy.

"I think this prophecy was meant to bring us together. All of us." I look around the room at the shifters and vampires under one roof. Or, rather, one cave. "You're the only one who tried to tear us apart."

Gaius shifts his hold on Itzel. His face contorts with guilt.

"You," I say to him, "I think you'll come around."

He raises a brow, and then sighs in a reluctant sound of agreement.

I turn to the rest of the women gathered. "You all have a choice of what path you'll follow. You can either stay here and build this community. Or you can go back to the old ways with her. It's your choice, which is more than I ever got."

I don't wait to see what choices get made. I only care to focus on one person's wellbeing. Viri has to lean on me and my strength as we walk out of the cave. But I barely feel his weight as Gaius is at his side, Hadrian is at his back, and Cari's hand is in mine.

This is my new family. They aren't perfect. They're a little crazy. But they have accepted me with no strings or prophecies attached, so it's an improvement.

I tuck my head under Viri's chin. I can hear his heart beating in his chest. His breath ruffles my hair. His strong arms are around me, holding me tight, and letting me know he'll never let me go.

EPILOGUE

VIRIUS

The rays on my face warm me from the tip of my nose on down to my toes. I'm barefoot as I stand in the sunlight, waiting for it to set as I wait for my mate.

"You're going to roast if you don't come into the shade."

My nose wrinkles, more at the smell of the lotion full of SPF than at Hadrian's voice. Some of my supernatural powers stayed with me when my blood was drained.

I am still abnormally strong, but I think that has more to do with my genes than anything else. I am still fast, though now everyone in my family could outpace me. Everyone except Marechal, who is the last remaining human hold out.

I can walk in the sun now, though I still would burn. Just not to a crisp like other vampires. Because I'm not exactly a vampire anymore. Nor am I a shifter. I'm also not exactly human.

But my skin will sunburn if I don't protect it. Already there is a red splotch on my forearm. So I heed my brother's words and step back inside the kitchen as the sun sets.

Hadrian isn't standing at the glass of the door, glaring at the solar orb like he's done every dusk for the last two hundred years. Instead, my vampire brother is at the stove, cooking a meaty dish in a wine reduction. It's wine from this year's harvest of the Balam Vineyards. The first year's vintage was in such high demand that the jaguar shifters working the land are now well into selling next year's crops.

Outside, the men and women of the Balam shifters come out of their homes and start the nightly ritual of tending to the vines which will secure their families' futures.

"Come away from the door," says Hadrian as he flips the meatballs. "She won't get here any faster with the screen open."

I give the long driveway one last lingering look. If she's more than a few yards away, I won't be able to hear her. My vampiric sense has deadened, but my hearing has grown sharper than ever. The crunch of gravel from a mile down the road tells me she's almost home.

"Ah, brother, you're making my favorite." Gaius appears in the doorway to the kitchen. The silk robe he wears is easily worth more than the grapes brought in this harvest. "*Animelles*."

Hadrian smacks Gaius's hand with the prongs before he can snag one of the fried testicles from the hot pan. "I thought it fitting, as this is the anniversary of our first year here."

"One year," muses Gaius. "Hard to believe, as so much has changed."

Everything had changed. This land is no longer ours. We're guests in our own house. But not one of us has any inclination to leave. Not when our mates love the land.

That is the most important change. We are all happily mated. And not one of our mates is psychotic or sadistic.

"You've got some balls on you, honey," says Cari as she comes up behind Hadrian.

"They're Gaius's favorite."

"I'm not eating that," says Marechal as she makes her way to the sink to wash the soil from her hands.

"You eat frog legs and snails," protests Gaius.

"You really want me to put another man's balls in my mouth?"

"It's a bull," he says, kissing her neck and then staring at the vein of her jugular. "It's like eating a hamburger."

I ignore the jibes between the two couples as a car comes to a stop in the driveway. I step outside into the moonlight as my own personal sun rises from the driver's

seat of the Tesla. It was a mighty task trying to get my wee kitten to spend the money I signed over to her, but she got the hang of it pretty quickly.

My eyes latch onto the six-inch heels that hug her slender feet. I'm already peeling the designer jeans from that lush ass with my mind. She flashes those sharp canines at me as I prowl up to her.

"There's my strong Roman," she purrs as I scoop her into my embrace.

I take her lips in greeting. My salutation is to slip my tongue into her mouth. My fangs are still there, but they're not as sharp as they once were. They are sharp enough to nick her tongue.

I lap up the droplet of blood I find there. I don't need much blood these days. But Zahara's essence is still an addiction.

"Guess who's the only student who got a hundred percent on her midterm?" she says when I release her lips.

"I don't need to guess," I say, carrying her out of the driveway and into the house.

"Hey, Z."

"Good day at school?"

"We're sitting down to eat in thirty, you two."

Zahara can't answer any of our family members with my tongue back in her mouth. I feel her hand leave my back as she waves a greeting to them. Then she yelps when I toss her onto our bed.

"You're being rude," she says after bouncing on the bed.

"I'm having dessert first," I say, unbuckling my pants.

"You'll ruin your appetite," she says while slipping out of her own jeans.

"Nah, I think I'll whet it," I say as I spread her thighs.

The flesh I find there is already flushed and red. Without preamble, I take her bud into my mouth. Zahara digs her claws into my hair as she presses me to her.

I lick and lave her pretty pussy until she trembles not once, but twice. Before she comes down from her second orgasm, I sink my fangs into my favorite of her femoral arteries.

Zahara howls as I gulp down a mouthful of her sweet, rich, endorphin-laced blood. A third orgasm rips through her as I suck. Her friend Frankie pulses with impatience for his turn.

He'll have to wait until I've strapped him up. We're pretty certain that getting Zahara pregnant is now one of my superpowers. But we've decided to wait, at least until after Zahara finishes university. Maybe longer.

It doesn't matter, the length of time. Though I know I gave up an eternal lifetime for her, I don't doubt for a second that every moment with her and with the child we will share someday will be worth every century I'll miss.

I take Frankie in hand as I prowl up her body. Zahara is blissed out from her three climaxes. I ease my way into her tight sheath. As always, it's a tight fit. But my woman, my mate, is eager to take all of me. And not just the part that is crazy about her.

She takes all of me, as I take all of her. She is the light that led me out of the darkness. It is for her that I came back to life after centuries of being the walking dead. It is because of her that I now truly live. Because, being with her, I am finally free.

The End

ABOUT INES JOHNSON

Lover of fairytales, folklore, and mythology, Ines Johnson spends her days reimagining the stories of old in a modern world. She writes books where damsels cause the distress, princesses wield swords, and moms save the world.

If you liked Ines' Vampires, then you'll love her Dragons; alpha male shifters, fated mates, and steamy romance with a touch of 80's nostalgia! To grab a free book from the world of the Last Dragons just visit <https://ineswrites.com/ReaderGroup>

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